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THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

Jan de Hartog

The Children of the Light

*1652-1653

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THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

Book I The Children Of The Light

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The Children of the Light

Lancashire, 1652-1653

Book I of *The Peaceable Kingdom*

Jan de Hartog

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MANY writers have dedicated books to their wives; few of them can have done so with more justification. Not only did mine sustain me with her faith in what I was doing, suffer my tantrums, bear my periods of gloom, share my moments of exultation; she did most of the historical research, made up a card file of over three thousand items, corrected two successive versions with painstaking thoroughness, and somehow managed at the same time to run a household, rear two children and emerge for committee meetings as if she had actually been looking forward to them. Yet all this does not touch upon the essence of her contribution to this book.

Some years ago, when both of us were involved in a concern called 'Friends Meeting for Sufferings of Vietnamese Children', a gathering of its members took place one night in Arch Street Meeting House, Philadelphia. I was sitting in the back of the room, listening to the minutes being read by Marjorie, who was one of three women on the facing bench. I know not what triggered it — a word, a sound, a passing thought — but suddenly the three women in the lamplight seemed to embody that intangible movement called The Religious Society of Friends. Suddenly, it no longer seemed a quaint coincidence that in the adjoining room was a glass case containing William Penn's first treaty with the Delaware Indians, that underneath the floor of the building in which we were gathered lay the graves of hundreds of Friends who had died nursing the sick during an epidemic of yellow fever, two centuries ago. It was as if, behind those three, the vast and numinous presence manifested itself of all the generations of anonymous Quaker women that had gone before, whose lives had been dedicated to the same thing: war orphans, abandoned children, refugee camps — all the sufferings of the helpless and the innocent.

It was an extraordinary experience, and without it I might not have undertaken the writing of this book. For that night I was moved, in one of those moments of rashness to which writers are prone, to erect a monument to those generations of women, who

transmitted the love of God through their lives, rather than their words. Now that this tome finally lies before me, I cannot let it go forth without planting on it, as a flag, the name of one of them, a far better Quaker than I, without whom this book would not be there — neither, I suspect, would I.

So, here goes *The Peaceable Kingdom*, dedicated to MARJORIE MEIN DE HARTOG, wife and friend, with love and admiration.

J. de H.

Florida, Summer 1971

Although based on events that took place and people who lived, THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM *is fiction. To emphasise this, I have changed all names; this was impossible only for the founders of the Society of Friends, George Fox and Margaret Fell, and some of their companions. I have also taken liberties with the layout of Lancaster Castle, in order to bring home to the reader the unmitigated horror of the place in the seventeenth century. In short, I have used the novelist's prerogative of being inspired by historical facts rather than governed by them.*

As to the dialogue: I have tried to avoid glaring anachronisms, but, aside from the use of the second person singular, I decided that the syntax and manner of speech of the period would seem quaint and thereby intrusive in the story.

BOOK ONE

THE CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT

LANCASHIRE, 1652 - 1653

CHAPTER ONE

THE horsemen were first seen crossing the quicksands of Morecambe Bay by Harry Martin and Boniface Baker, stable-boys of Swarthmoor Hall. It was the first really warm day after Saint Swithin's; the grooms, the gardeners, even Mr. Woodhouse, the steward, had turned in for a nap after the noonday meal, all so drowsy with the unaccustomed heat that nobody had thought to set the boys a task. They made the most of the occasion by sneaking out in their stockinged feet, clogs in hand, running swiftly and silently along the walls of the courtyard, past the pigeons clustered together in the shade, too hot to flutter or even to coo. They risked the birch, on top of whatever other punishment might be meted out to them for playing truant, by running across the forbidden rose garden with Mistress Fell's opulent flower beds into the orchard, where they loped like young dogs through the hip-high grass strewn with daisies to the high arch of the entrance gate, and out on to the deserted fells.

They started by looking for cockchafers, the June bugs that were worth a fortune if properly trained to pull little carts or run little treadmills that watered miniature gardens; they were one of the main attractions of every village fair. The boys gamboled in the bracken, oblivious of the rapidly gathering thunderclouds that began to reach out over the fells from the mountains in the north. There were plenty of cockchafers about, flitting with rattling wings from shrub to shrub, but so early in the year they were still far too nimble to be caught. So the boys started to look for birds' nests, especially those of the yaffingale, for if the chicks were lifted and fed for a few weeks with small bugs and then blinded with a red-hot needle, they would start to sing and could be sold in the market. They were not worth a brace of trained cockchafers, but they might bring in two groats apiece, more if they were hawked from door to door of the manor house kitchens in the neighbourhood. But that was risky because of the gossiping that went on among the cooks; sooner or later Will Hartford the head groom, or Mr. Woodhouse would be sure to hear of it and then the fat would be in the fire.

There were no birds' nests either, however; or if there were, they were well hidden. All the boys could raise were a few larks

that started to flutter around them, anxiously chattering, to lead them away from their nests; but there were no yaffingales at all.

It was Harry Martin who first spotted the horsemen: two small dots that had detached themselves from the dark bluffs on the other side of the estuary and were now approaching across the sands. 'Bonny!' he cried. 'Look, over there! Look!'

Boniface Baker looked, but he saw nothing; the whiteness of the sands in the fierce slanting sunlight blinded him. 'What is it?'

'Over there! Below Holker Hall!'

Bonny shielded his eyes with his hand and gazed into the distance; after a moment he saw them too: two horsemen, small and lost in the immense expanse of the sands, following the brogs of the bridle path that wound its way between the sinkholes and the patches of quicksand, from which no horse or man could ever extricate himself. He leaped to his feet. 'But they'll never make it!'

'Of course they won't. Look! The tide has already turned!'

So it had. Lonely Chapel Island, where in the old days the monks had tolled a bell and said masses for the souls of travellers who had perished in the quicksands, was already surrounded by the sea. The incoming tide raced across the sands faster than a galloping horse, and the strangers faced certain death in the on-rushing waters unless they turned back at once and rode as fast as they could to the bluffs of Cark. If they tarried only a few minutes longer, they would be doomed; the sands were soft in the centre of the estuary and would slow down their pace; the swirling tide would overtake them and sweep their horses off their feet; the moment the brogs that marked the path were submerged they would end up in one of the pits of quicksand and be drawn under.

Fascinated by the spectacle of two men riding to their death, the boys stood motionless in the bracken; then, for the first time, they heard the rumble of the approaching storm.

'Look at the weather,' Harry Martin said.

Bonny looked. The peak of Old Man Coniston in the distance had already vanished in the clouds; lightning flashed in the blackness; the wind dragged a slanting curtain of rain across the fells towards Ulverston; even as they looked they saw the shadow reach the town and extinguish the spark of the weathercock atop the church tower. It would not be long before the storm reached

them; if they wanted to be home before it hit, they would have to run for it.

But the distant horsemen had failed to turn around; they continued to ride unsuspectingly into the deathtrap of the shimmering sands. They could not see it from where they were, but the boys, hearts racing with excitement, saw the swift ripple of silver water slide inexorably towards them. 'Somebody should go and tell the Colonel!' Bonny said. 'Maybe somebody could signal them from the tower.'

'Too late. They are done for.'

'But we can't just stand here and watch! We should do something!'

'We should be on our way home,' Harry said, 'and fast! Come on!'

But Bonny did not move. He gazed at the two little horsemen innocently cantering towards their end; they had almost reached the soft sands and the first slithering tongues of water were lapping at their horses' feet. They were close enough now that he could distinguish the colour of the horses: one brown, one white; one of the men wore a white hat, stark in the sunlight. But not for much longer, for from the north, almost as fast as the water, the black shadow of the thunderstorm came racing towards them with the slanting curtain of rain.

'Come on, Bonny! They'll be missing us at the Hall! Hurry, please!'

'Tell thee what,' Boniface said, suddenly determined. 'Go thou to the Hall, I'll go and tell the Colonel.' He turned away and began to run in the direction of the town.

'Don't, Bonny!' Harry shouted after him. 'It's too late!' But his friend was out of earshot now, or refused to listen; he went on running, jumping over clumps of bracken, frightening the browsing sheep, while in the distance forked lightning flashed in the ink-black sky and the low, angry rumble of thunder growled. It was a crack-brained thing to do; a child could see that the men could not be rescued now, it was too late, they had gone too far, not even a boat could reach them in time. Will Hartford would be furious when he found out the boys had played truant; the dramatic news of the drowning horsemen might have diverted his attention, but with Bonny Baker gone there was certain to be terrible trouble. Harry Martin spat angrily at the back of his treacherous friend leaping in the distance; then he started to run as fast as his legs could carry him towards the Hall. The sharp

sunlight, about to be extinguished by the storm, flashed in the windows of the west wing; a wisp of smoke rose from one of the chimneys; Cook was starting the kitchen fire for supper.

* * *

The house of Colonel Best, the coroner, lay on the outskirts of town, a small manor built of ship's timbers and red brick in a walled garden. Bonny Baker, panting, stumbling, reached the gate just as the first heavy drops of rain thudded into the dust of the road. In a last spurt of strength he sprinted down the garden path pelted by rain; he hit the closed bottom half of the kitchen door with a bang, one of his clogs slipped from his hand and fell inside on the flagstones with a loud clatter. It startled 'Monsoor' Bonnecharme, the Colonel's cook, who stood cutting up something at the table, his back to the door. He jumped around, brandishing a foot-long carving knife, and cried in a high-pitched cantankerous voice, '*Sacré nom!* you are crazy, no? You want me to run myself through, no? *Sacré gosse!*'

But Bonny knew Monsoor well enough to be no longer frightened by his French explosions; he panted, 'Monsoor, Monsoor, please, please, the Colonel! The Colonel must come! Two men, two horsemen . . .' He could not catch his breath.

Kathryn, Mrs. Best's buxom maid, who had bustled in when she heard the noise, asked, 'What's going on here? What's the matter with thee, boy?'

'Two horsemen on the sands . . .' Bonny panted. 'They're in the soft part now, they'll never get out. The Colonel must help them, somebody must help them, or they'll drown . . .'

'Ah! *Sacré nom de putain!*' Monsoor cried, shaking his carving knife at the ceiling. 'There go my lobsters for tonight! That's the fishmongers from Cark! Ah! *Misère! Miséricorde!* What a country!'

'No, sir, no, sir, no, Monsoor!' Bonny cried. 'It isn't the fishmongers, sir, it's strangers, two strangers. People who live here know better than to ride out across the sands with the tide coming in.'

But Monsoor Bonnecharme refused to be consoled. He threw his carving knife among the pewter dishes on the table with a clatter, slapped his skull with alarming force and shouted, 'There they go! My lobsters! What am I going to give them for supper tonight, what, *bon Dieu de bon Dieu?*'

'Oh, come,' Kathryn said with obvious disgust. 'Two people

are choking to death in the quicksands and all you can think of is lobsters! Bonny—'

'Well, *sacré nom de putain de Bretagne*!' Monsoor shrieked, getting into his stride. 'Who, in the name of the smoking Trinity, will think about lobsters if I do not? If I were not squeezing my life's blood out of my *entrailles* to feed them, *Monsieur le Colonel et Madame* would have to subsist on peeg's trotteurs, feesh and potato, shepherd's pee!'

'Oh, for mercy's sake!' Kathryn cried, turning her back on him. 'Wait here, boy, I'll go and tell *Madame*!' In the doorway she turned around and said, 'Don't go away, now. The Colonel may want to speak to thee.'

'*Voilà!*' Monsoor cried triumphantly, pointing at the door through which she had vanished. '*Le Colonel*, he want to speak to thee!' He mimicked her, cattily. 'She does not say "Poor boy, stay in the warm kitchen until the rain stops", no, no! I am *un monstre* because I worry about her supper instead of praying for two fools drowning in the sand, while she would send a child, drenched by the rain, exhausted from running, back into the storm without turning a hair on her — her *cul de guenon*!' He took a deep breath to continue, but a rapping on the ceiling overhead cut him short. '*Sacré nom*,' he whispered. '*Madame!*'

The thunder crashed much closer; a whirlwind lashed the windowpanes with rain. As Monsoor Bonnecharme rushed towards the door to close it, a huge man with matted hair and a beard dripping with water appeared in the opening. He glanced about him before holding up a big dead hare.

'*Monsieur* McHair!' the cook cried, a shout of joy. 'Angel, messenger from heaven, Gabriel! How did you know my lobsters were drowning?'

'Good day to thee, Monsoor, my friend,' the man growled, with a grin of rotted teeth. 'How about inviting me in for a bowl of soup?'

'Come in, come in,' the cook whispered, opening the door, 'but be quiet and do not show this glorious beast! I'll stick him in a bucket! Come, come,' he urged, letting the giant in and closing the top door, locking out the rain. 'Hush!' He pointed at the ceiling. 'She is upstairs, listening. Do not speak about thees . . .' He took the big limp hare from the poacher and kissed its dead cold nose. '*Ah, mon petit chou! Mon petit joujou!*'

The giant grinned and winked at Boniface; obviously, he had never seen a man kiss a dead hare before either.

Boniface smiled at him a little wanly, for an astonished sadness had been growing within him ever since he arrived. Nobody seemed to give thought to the two little horsemen who must now be struggling for their lives in the ice-cold swirling waters of Morecambe Bay. He could almost hear them shouting for help, faint desperate voices in the wind; then lightning flashed behind the windows and a terrific thunderclap crashed nearby.

Monsoor Bonnecharme closed his eyes, folded his hands with the dead animal in his arms and mumbled rapidly, '*Douce vierge pleine de grâce, protégez-nous,*' before taking the lid off a bucket by the stove and dumping the hare into it, head first.

* * *

'What on earth is going on below?' Henrietta Best asked irritably when her maid entered. She hated thunderstorms, they set her nerves on edge.

'One of the stableboys from the Hall, *Madame,*' the girl answered. 'He came to tell the Colonel that two horsemen seem to be caught by the tide.'

'In this weather? What does he expect the Colonel to do about it? Who sent him, anyhow?'

'I think he saw them himself, *Madame*, and just came running to tell the Colonel. He's too young to know that he could have saved himself the trouble.'

Henrietta Best shot her a glance in the steel mirror. 'How touching,' she said, and continued fussing with her wig. She had begun to ask herself of late whether the girl was impertinent or merely artless. 'Has anybody told the Colonel?'

'I don't believe so, *Madame.*'

'Well, why don't you? We don't want that little boy to have run all the way for nothing, do we?'

As in her mirror she saw the girl turn to go, she asked, 'What was Bonbon shouting about?'

'Oh, I don't know, *Madame.* Something about lobsters.'

'I thought I heard the words "*cul de guenon*". What does that have to do with lobsters?'

'I really couldn't say, *Madame,*' the girl answered stiffly. 'I don't speak his language.'

'They mean "fat buttocks of a female baboon",' Henrietta Best explained, observing her in the mirror. 'I hope you are not picking a quarrel with him again?'

The girl mumbled, 'No, *Madame*,' and hurried out of the room, her composure shattered.

'And, Kathryn!' Henrietta Best called after her. 'When you've finished warning the Colonel, tell Bonbon to come up here. I want to talk to him.' There was no reply.

Silly to needle that girl. She was an excellent maid; rather than poking fun at her bulk one should be grateful for it, as it lessened the chances of her being carried off by some yokel to breed little Puritans in one of those dank, smelly cottages on the fells. Really, with an overweight maid and a *pédéraste* for a cook, she should count her blessings rather than take out on them her nervous irritation induced by the weather. Poor Bonbon; what a swath a true Frenchman could have cut in this sanctimonious town of strait-laced females, every single one of them desperate to leap into the hay with a shriek of perdition, wringing her hands in prayer while being mounted. Thank God dear Bonbon was the way he was; next thing you knew, one of his paramours would have had him up for witchcraft or blasphemy or for having closed a pact with the devil, never because she had been raped, of course. Oh, no, never rape; in this blessed corner of these blessed isles we all pretend that babies are hatched out of eggs, pink eggs for girls and blue eggs for boys, not torn screaming from our guts *intra faeces et urinam*. Like Jeannot, in that cellar in the straw, with all those men watching . . . She shivered. Not again, not that.

She threw the comb angrily at the ageing woman in the mirror; it clattered down among the little bottles and the jars. What in the name of sanity was she wearing this idiotic wig for? Look at it: lace, velvet bows, silk ribbons; and all that just to sit opposite her dear nincompoop at table and hear him grind on about grouse or horses or the plight of the weavers since the Civil War, messily masticating one of Bonbon's exquisite delicacies, washing it down with draughts of claret with which he rinsed his mouth, while the little man hovered pathetically behind him, on tenterhooks with the artist's desperate need for praise or even a sign of awareness that something had been created.

Another colossal thunderclap crashed into the foaming trees outside the window; she closed her eyes and covered her ears with her hands, her elbows on her dressing-table. Don't be foolish, she told herself, don't be foolish; it is only thunder. It almost worked; then she remembered that this was what she had said to the children when the guns started firing.

She tried to extricate herself from the past; she must not allow herself to think any further, she mustn't, she mustn't . . . Then she remembered, with a feeling of liberation, the two men lost in the quicksands, the message brought by a boy. Boy! She sat up sharply. To be thankful that Bonbon could cause no trouble with women was one thing, to furnish him with young boys another. She got up briskly and strode towards the door, damask rustling, out of danger now, and came face to face with her husband in the doorway. 'Well, m'dear,' he said, buttoning his coat, 'I had better go and start the search for the bodies of those poor wretches. It's a deuced nuisance just before supper, and in this weather . . .' He tried to look pained, but it was obvious that he would enjoy it immensely.

'Here,' she said, 'give me thy sash.'

'Sash? Oh — of course.'

He handed her the wide orange ribbon with tassels that he had hung around his neck when he started to button his coat; she lifted her skirts and knelt in front of him to tie it around his corpulent waist. Just then Bonbon came running up the stairs and appeared behind his master. '*Monsieur le Colonel* is not going out?!' His voice sounded reproachful, like a lover's.

'Of course I am!' Her husband stiffened irritably.

'Stand still,' she said.

Bonbon began a long jeremiad about spoiled dishes and wine that had just been decanted; her husband muttered, 'Oh, for mercy's sake! Send that screaming parrot away.'

'*Ça va, Bonbon. Monsieur le Colonel sera de retour dans une demi-heure.*' It was not true, of course; once he left the house he would be away a great deal longer than half an hour; apart from riding to hounds, the stag hunt and the occasional hanging, he had nothing by way of entertainment, poor dear, except his ghoulish duties.

'Forgive me,' he said as Bonbon, huffed, clattered down the stairs in his plopping slippers. 'I just can't stand the creature. Must be his nature, I suppose.'

'Stand still.' She tied a neat feminine bow in his sash of office. The thunder rumbled and rain lashed the windowpanes, bringing reminiscences of other sashes had tied, and untied.

Then a child's voice screamed shrilly in the kitchen.

* * *

Colonel William Best wondered what the devil it was this time;

there could be no other household in bleeding Lancashire so addicted to screams, tantrums, flying into snits or taking umbrage. He was about to stamp angrily downstairs and tell that hysterical bunch of good-for-nothings what he thought of them when he happened to look down and saw his wife's face. She stared at him with eyes full of horror; in one second she had aged ten years. He was torn between staying with her and going downstairs; then she leaped to her feet and rushed out of the room, breaking her own spell or being drawn into its vortex, he did not know which. He followed her, no longer angry but deeply worried.

The past year it had seemed as if at last they had managed to erase her past; she had seemed gay, carefree, loving. But, obviously, she had been unable to exorcise her ghosts; all it needed to throw the poor soul back into the torments of hell was the scream of a child. As he clumped down the stairs in his heavy riding boots, sideways because of his spurs, his anger returned with a vengeance. Whoever the idiot was that had caused his wife's distress, he would pay for it, as would that castrated poodle and that shrieking wench.

The first one he saw as he entered the kitchen was the damned poacher. This was the limit! He had given orders not to buy any more game from that brigand, for the sake of sweet peace with John Sawrey, yet here he was again!

And there was the boy, obviously the one who had brought the message, as white as a sheet; in the doorway stood two strangers dripping with rain and dishevelled by the storm, one with a white hat which he had not bothered to remove.

'Well?' he enquired gruffly. 'Did you find the bodies?'

Then the boy spoke up. 'No, sir,' he said in a high-pitched, frightened voice. 'There are no bodies! Those are the men I saw . . .'

'Don't talk bloody nonsense! Nobody can cross the sands at incoming tide, not even if his horse has wings.'

'The boy speaks the truth, friend,' the stranger with the white hat said. 'We crossed the sands, our horses swimming part of the way.'

'Nonsense!' the Colonel repeated, angered by the man's presumption. 'I was born in this town, my father was coroner of this county before me; never has any man who set out from Cark after the turn of the tide reached this shore alive. It is impossible.'

'I can well believe it,' the stranger said. 'But we were in the power of the Lord.'

His wife must have sensed his outrage, for suddenly he felt the coolness of her hand upon his and he heard her say, 'You are drenched, gentlemen; won't you come in and partake of a meal and dry your clothes in front of the fire? Surely you're not planning to travel on tonight?'

'We are bound for Swarthmoor Hall,' the stranger said, courteously enough but still without doffing his hat or addressing her correctly.

'Are you expected there tonight?'

'No.'

'In that case, you had better stay here until morning, and so had thee, dear boy,' she added, turning to Bonny. 'Bonbon, take care of these gentlemen. And now, if you will excuse me . . .' She pressed her husband's hand and he had no choice but to proffer his arm to escort her back upstairs.

But she did not want to go back upstairs; she steered him across the hall to that small withdrawing-room in the far corner, where they were wont to drink a glass of muscatel before supper. As they walked he felt her hand trembling on his arm; the screech of that idiot boy must have upset her deeply. He closed the door behind them and led her to a chair; as he turned to pour out the wine, he said, in an effort to divert her attention. 'I thought I'd made it clear that I did not want any more game to be brought to this house by John McHair! Didst thou not inform thy French creampuff of my wishes?'

But she was not listening; she only became aware of his presence when he handed her the heavy glass. She smiled to thank him, but did not speak. She took the glass and held it close to her bosom as if she were sheltering it, like a kitten. He was about to say something soothing when she said, 'Whatever brought that man here, it was an ill wind.'

'What man?'

That fanatic. The one with the white hat.'

'Why? What hast thou against him, other than that he has no manners and is an obvious liar?'

'Oh, no, he is no liar,' she said with a wistful smile. 'He crossed those sands, all right.'

'But, dear heart, it is not possible! The tide runs too strong, and once the brogs are washed under no man can find his way

through the quicksands. Not even those who have lived here all their lives.'

She shrugged her shoulders with feminine disdain for the laws of nature. 'Oh, his horse must have swum or something, I don't know,' she said wearily. 'All I know is that he is a bird of ill omen.'

'Now, what makes thee say that?'

She looked at him with an odd expression in her eyes. It was not fear, it was not despair, it was as if she had dropped a mask and now was looking at him as her true self, the Douce Tété he had met and married in Paris thirteen years before. 'Because he looked at me with love,' she answered.

The words were so unexpected, their impact so stunning, that he stood looking at her, mouth open, for several moments before rage overwhelmed him. 'Well, God spare my soul!' he cried, slamming the glass down on the table. 'I'll go and throw the swine out of my house right now!'

'No!' She seized his sash and stopped him in his tracks, making him feel ridiculous. 'That's not what I meant! Not that kind of love!'

His anger collapsed; he felt suddenly embarrassed and ill at ease. For thirteen years they had never mentioned the conditions under which they had met; they had avoided the subject so skillfully that by now it was as if it had concerned two different people. 'Then what dost thou mean?'

'He looked at me the way the . . . the saints used to look,' she replied. 'With divine love.'

He wanted her to don that mask again, more for her sake than his own. But he had to know. 'What dost thou mean?'

'Indiscriminate, impersonal love,' she replied, with that wistful smile again that distressed him more than anything else. 'Love for its own sake, not mine.'

Obviously, she thought of the past all the time, it was an obsession, a kind of mania. He closed his eyes and wished, more fervently than he had wished anything for a long time, that he could help her forget, help her free herself of the fetters he had thought she had shaken off. But this was a cross she would have to bear for the rest of her days. What had happened in that little town in France twenty-four years before still dominated her life. 'I can have him thrown out of the county,' he said unconvincingly.

'That would be the worst thing thou couldst do. People like that thrive on persecution.'

'Who is he, for sweet Christ's sake? How dost thou know all this?' His anger returned; it was a different anger now, the anger of powerlessness. What had they done to God to have this man foisted upon them at this point, so late in their lives?

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't know who he is, I only know what he is: a saint. I mean someone who is drunk with God.'

'I don't understand.'

'Thou must have met them thyself in the courtroom or in thy travels. It doesn't matter what church they belong to, whether they are Papists or Protestants or Independents, they are all exactly alike. Their eyes shine with love; they are obsessed with mercy and salvation; they hear voices nobody else hears, see visions only they can see; they believe that they have been sent by God to change the world. But all they do is set people at each other's throats, separate parents from children, husbands from wives. They want everyone they meet to desert those they love, drop whatever they are doing, give up all they possess and follow God, which means following *them*. It always ends in violence and horror and death, but that does not matter to them. They would feel rejected by God unless they were imprisoned or tortured or burned at the stake or hanged from a meat hook or had their tongues ripped out or their genitals torn off . . .' She covered her face with her hands.

He could not allow this; whatever happened, he had to stop her from being drawn back into that dark unknown horror in her past. He went to her and put his hand on her shoulder with tenderness. He wanted to speak, but did not know what to say. Some of his concern, his love must have been evident, for suddenly she grabbed his hand and covered it with kisses and whispered, 'Oh, Will, Will, Will, my love; hold me, please, please hold me . . .'

He held her, while distant laughter rang out in the kitchen.

* * *

'Where wert thou born, friend Boniface?' the stranger asked the next morning, as the horse they were riding turned on to the fells.

'I don't know, sir,' Bonny answered happily. 'I suppose somewhere around these parts, Lancaster way.'

'Surely thy parents must have told thee?'

'I never knew my parents, sir.'

It seemed a dream: the horse, the warm presence of the stranger behind him, the birds, the sunrise, the rolling fells, the white clouds of summer in the high blue sky. It made his heart swell with pride and happiness; never before had anyone betrayed such interest in him. It took the menace out of the gloomy Hall ahead. All night he had tossed and turned in the straw of the loft over Colonel Best's stables; he had wakened not knowing where he was, and had become afraid when he remembered. He did not dare think of what Will Hartford would do to him when he got home; ten strokes of the birch were the least he could expect. But, sitting in front of the powerful stranger astride his white horse, all fear dissipated. He was safe; compared to the miracle of riding across the sands against the incoming tide, to protect a stableboy from being beaten by the head groom was nothing.

'Ah, thou art an orphan?'

'No, sir,' he replied. 'I am a foundling.'

'Then who gave thee thy name?' the stranger enquired. 'Did someone write it on a piece of paper, by chance, and pin it to thy swaddling clothes?'

'No, sir, it was given to me by the women in the foundling house in Kendal. I was found on the stoop in a little basket, early in the morning.'

'Ah?'

'Somebody banged on the door and opened it and shoved in the basket, calling, "Baker!" The mother told me she was the one who said, "I'm going to call him Boniface, he has a bonny face." ' He grinned and tried to look up at the stranger, but he could not twist his neck that far.

'And who put thee to work at the Hall?' the voice behind him insisted. 'Justice Fell is an important man in these parts. It is quite an honour.'

'I know, sir,' Boniface said eagerly. 'I was very lucky. I was playing outside when a coach-and-four came down the street; I saw that the cap of one of the wheels had come off, and I ran after it, shouting; I had to run quite a way before they heard me. Then the coachman stopped and got down and looked; if they had gone on a little longer, the wheel would have come off. Then somebody opened the door of the carriage, a man in a big hat with an ostrich feather; he wanted to give me a groat, but I didn't take it, because we had been taught never to take money for doing a kindness. Then he said, "How would you like to work as a

stableboy at my house?" I said, "I would love to, sir, but I would have to ask the house mother and she may not know who you are." And he said, "Tell the house mother that Chief Justice Thomas Fell of Swarthmoor Hall wants to see her and thee tomorrow morning." Then he pulled the door shut, they drove off and I went back to the house and told the mother. We went the next day. I was lucky I got his name straight.'

'Well, Boniface,' the stranger said earnestly, 'what dost thou think made thee run after that coach to warn them about the wheel?'

Boniface thought. 'The same thing that made me run to the Colonel's house to tell him about you, sir, I suppose.'

'Even more so, for by doing that thou risked punishment. So, what made thee run through that thunderstorm and risk being punished?'

'I don't know, sir. I just couldn't watch you and your friend ride into the quicksands without doing something about it.'

'Thy friend could.'

It was true what the stranger said, yet it did not seem fair to Harry Martin. 'If I'd known you were going to perform a miracle, sir, I wouldn't have run either.'

'It wasn't I who performed the miracle, friend Bonny. It was the Lord in whose power we were.'

'Yes, sir,' he said obediently.

'That has little meaning for thee, has it?'

The question startled him. It was as if the stranger, apart from the power to do miracles, could read his thoughts.

'Dost thou know the Lord, friend Bonny?'

He had heard about the Lord all his life, prayed to Him every night, but know Him? He was about to say something evasive when he remembered that his thoughts would be read anyhow. 'No, sir,' he said.

'That is strange, for a boy who has been in His power twice in a lifetime.'

'I . . . ?'

'It was He who made thee run after that carriage. It was He who made thee warn the coroner, knowing thou wouldst be punished.'

He thought about it, gazing at the Hall across the meadows. He could discern the lattice on the windows now; something white moved in the shade of the trees that sheltered the house. It

must be one of the young ladies; none of the servants wore white.

'Well?'

'But I didn't see anything, sir. I didn't hear any voices either. I just saw you and ran.'

'But what prompted thee to run?'

'I don't know, sir. Something — something inside me.'

'Aha!' the stranger cried. 'Where dost thou think God lives? In the sky?'

He wasn't sure he liked this turn in the conversation. He would rather talk about himself.

'That's where thou art wrong,' the stranger continued. 'He lives within thee, friend Boniface. Within everyone.'

'Have you done many miracles?' Bonny asked, to change the subject.

'Not I, remember? Man performs miracles only when he is in the power of the Lord. It may happen to anyone, it may happen to thee. His power is within thee; He is there, in all His glory: all light, all joy. He is the power that creates and rejoices in His creation. What He radiates, above all else, is joy.'

Bonny felt the joy radiate from the man behind him. Suddenly he was overcome by the desire to shout, to sing. He had never felt this way before; he had never dreamed that anything to do with church could be gay. 'Yes, sir,' he said.

'Hast thou ever prayed?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Don't call me "sir". Thou and I are children of the Light, we are brothers. Call me George, and address me with "thou" instead of "you".'

He could hardly contain that shout. He whispered, 'Yes, George.'

'Hast thou ever really prayed? Hast thou ever not asked for anything, but just opened the gates of thy soul, to let that of God within thee fly forth?'

Boniface shook his head.

'Dost thou feel like doing so now? Go on, friend Bonny! Sing, whisper, shout; pray, little friend, pray!'

So it came about that John Foster the shepherd, tending his flock outside Swarthmoor Hall, was startled by a high-pitched child's shriek which flushed a lark from its nest and sent it, twittering and warbling, straight up into the sky. He saw a white horse canter by, on its back a man with a white hat and in front

of him one of the stableboys from the Hall. He thought the child was being abducted and that the shriek he had heard had been a cry for help; but when the boy spotted him, he waved and shouted, 'Top of the morning to ye, John Foster!'

He did not return the greeting. He gazed after them, mouth open, leaning on his staff, as the horse thundered through the bracken, clods flying, down into the glen. There, small and white, it forged the stream, silver flashing in the sun and cantered across the rutted road, raising a cloud of dust before it vanished through the gate.

* * *

A few hours later that morning the same shepherd, from his vantage point on the high fell opposite the Hall, saw another cloud of dust rising on the road from Ulverston. Soon a small carriage drawn by two black horses appeared around the bend; he recognised it even at that distance. It was the coach-and-pair from the Hall, bringing Mistress Fell back from her weekly visit to the market. Every Friday morning, come rain or shine, he watched her leave and return. He had known her ever since she was a little girl, a beautiful child, golden-haired, picking flowers; one time the maid had brought her to him to ask if Miss Margaret might stroke the little black lamb. He had stood outside the church when she came out, radiant and beautiful in her wedding gown, by the side of the judge old enough to be her father. Now, twenty years later, she was still a strikingly beautiful woman, but with a flaring temper, as he had occasion to witness whenever his herd happened to block the way as Mistress Fell in her coach-and-pair came careening down the road, horses snorting, foam flying; she had at times told him to move along so forcefully that he had still been shaking in his boots hours later.

Margaret Fell did not see John Foster as her carriage lurched and bounced down the lane to the Hall. Despite last night's thunderstorm, dust swirled around the coach in clouds, obscuring the view; only as the horses slowed down and entered the gateway did the dust subside. From the thinning cloud emerged a black-cloaked shape with a floppy hat, like a scarecrow; she recognised Priest Lampitt and rapped on the little window in the roof. The coach stopped joltingly; she opened the door. To her amazement, the priest did not stop to pay his respects; he strode past, his very back expressing wrath. Something had upset him; maybe young George had plagued him again with questions

about Adam's navel or Cain's wife. She was happy the boy was showing some mischief at last after ten years of impersonating his father, but he should not tease priests as part of his growing up. She signalled Will Hartford, who was peering at her through the little window in the roof, to drive on; as the carriage rolled up the driveway, lurching and creaking, she told the maid on the opposite seat to hold on to the basket containing the bottles of sack and the jar of stewed Morocco plums which she had bought on the spur of the moment, prompted by an intuition that her husband was on his way home. If he did not come home, she would give the plums to the priest, to smooth over Adam's navel.

As always on market day, Will Hartford drove the coach around to the kitchen entrance. There another odd thing happened: Cook did not come running out for the groceries. Will Hartford opened the carriage door and helped her down the wobbly steps; she looked around and saw that the yard was empty. No servant girls scouring crocks at the back of the house, no stableboys to take over the reins of the horses; only the pigeons, strutting and cooing on the cobbles, and Cassandra the cat, washing herself on the kitchen steps.

'Where is everybody?' she asked.

Will Hartford bellowed obligingly, 'Henderson! Harry! Bonny! What's going on here?'

The kitchen door opened and Henderson, the henchwoman, came flip-flopping down the steps in her house mules, startling the cat. 'Forgive me, ma'am, forgive me,' she breathed, in a fluster. 'We were all in the kitchen, listening to the preacher. We did not hear the carriage.'

'But I saw him leave minutes ago!'

'Oh, not that preacher, ma'am! The new one! He performed a miracle last night by crossing the sands against the tide, and he brought Bonny home this morning, and when Thomas Woodhouse wanted to scold the boy for staying out all night, he explained that he had been in the power of the Lord when he ran to warn the coroner and—'

'For mercy's sake, woman!' Margaret Fell cried. 'Stop snattering and help Mary with the shopping!' She gathered her skirts and ran up the steps; at the door she turned around. 'Mind those plums in the basket!' She swept into the kitchen, sending several shapes scurrying in the gloom; those nearest the door were unable to escape. 'What is going on here, may I ask?'

Normally, the servants would have responded with apprehension; this time their reaction was sluggish, almost sullen. 'Beg pardon, ma'am,' Thomas Woodhouse said, from the centre of the group. 'We have been listening to a soul-stirring sermon from Preacher George. The love of the Lord was over us all.' He put his hand on the shoulder of Bonny the stableboy, standing beside him; the child looked flushed, as if he had knocked back the remainder of his master's stirrup cup.

Her anger flared. It was amusing to receive itinerant preachers in the house, they provided a diversion from the dreary routine, but if they started to stir up the servants, they were going to be shown the door. 'Where is this holy man?' she asked.

'Ann Traylor showed him into the garden to await your coming, ma'am,' the steward replied with a dignity that did not improve her mood.

She felt tempted to send them all about their business with an angry command, but there was something challenging in their attitude, as if they were daring her. The love of the Lord indeed! She turned away and walked through the dark passage to the main house.

In the drawing-room she ran into another gathering, in front of the empty hearth: her six daughters, Ann Traylor the governess, Will Caton the tutor, and Mabby the scullery maid, huddled together in excited conversation. Her appearance surprised them, but they too seemed oddly unperturbed. Isabel, the eleven-year-old, always the first to climb a tree, cried excitedly, 'Mother, Mother! You have missed something! A new preacher and Priest Lampitt got into a fight, and the priest lost!'

'Don't be ridiculous, Izzy,' Meg, the oldest, said sternly. 'Thou talkest as if they had come to blows.'

'Well, they jolly nearly did!' Isabel's hair was hanging over her forehead again and the lenses of her lopsided spectacles were grubby as usual; she had to look over them to see. 'I really thought he was going to hit him!'

'Who was?'

'Priest Lampitt!'

Then five-year-old Mary piped up, in one of her rare forays from the world in which she lived, 'Do you know what he said, Mother? He told the priest that God was in his belly.'

'That God *was* his belly,' Meg corrected.

So that was why Priest Lampitt had left in such a huff! At

least it had not been George, let's be grateful for small mercies. 'And where is this fisticuffer?' she asked.

'In the garden, ma'am,' Ann Traylor replied, respectfully, but not sufficiently so.

They were all watching her. They sensed her anger and were eagerly awaiting the next act of the drama. Well, they were going to be disappointed. She would not give the troublemaker an opportunity to taunt her. She had dealt with his kind before; nothing doused their zest more effectively than regal politeness.

'All right,' she said briskly. 'You have had enough excitement for one morning. Mabby, go and help Henderson unload the groceries. Ann, take the girls to the orchard to gather daisies.'

'Oh, Mother!' Isabel protested. 'We have daisies coming out of our ears!'

'That will be enough from thee, young woman! If thou art not content playing in the orchard, go and put thy closet in order. Methinks that was last done months ago.' She turned away and crossed the hall to the bright open door to the garden.

On the bench by the rose garden a fair-haired man was sitting, head bent as if in prayer, a white hat on the seat beside him. Her steps crunched on the gravel as she walked towards him; he heard it and looked up.

He did not rise to greet her, let alone bow or make a leg; he just stared at her. He was younger than she had expected, poor, ill-kempt, unwashed: a travelling student, trying to find board and keep for a few weeks, as did scores of others every summer.

'Whom have I the pleasure of welcoming to Swarthmoor Hall?' The courtesy did not come readily in the face of his boorish behaviour.

His eyes went on searching hers. They were blue, like a sailor's, and of an odd shape, rather slanted. 'I am George Fox,' he said. 'May the Lord, infinite ocean of light and love, bless thee and awaken thee, Margaret Fell.'

The ludicrous presumption that he was in a position to dispense such a grandiloquent blessing made her bristle. 'Who directed you here, sir?'

He looked at her with unsettling intensity and answered, 'The Lord.'

'I see. Do you perchance have a letter of introduction?'

'Yes,' he said.

The insolence of his reply made her want to call Thomas

Woodhouse and have him thrown off the premises. But his eyes kept her from doing so. There was no impertinence in them; he seemed absorbed by what he saw, heedless of the impression he made. 'Last night my companion and I crossed the sands,' he said. 'We are strangers here, we did not know they were dangerous. When we reached Ulverston we were welcomed by a crowd of people who told us that we were the only men in living memory to set out from Cark on the incoming tide and reach Ulverston alive. Now, who dost thou think guided our horses safely through the quicksands, if it was not the Lord?'

If he spoke the truth, he should be congratulated on a stroke of exceptional good fortune. Attempts to cross the sands on the incoming tide had proved so consistently disastrous that a monastery had thrived on the proceeds for three hundred years, saying yearly masses for the dead at a fixed fee. Obviously, her servants had needed no further proof of his claim that he was an emissary from the Almighty. 'Have you any idea, sir, why the Lord chose to send you hither at such expense?'

'No,' he replied. 'Hast thou?'

She had had enough. 'No. I am at a loss why He should single us out for a visitation by a boorish stranger who presumes to inform my priest that God is in his belly and incites my servants to insolence. I am afraid I cannot consider you to be God-sent, sir, merely because you failed to drown on your way here.' She made a gesture towards the house. 'You know the way out, I believe.'

He smiled. 'I am sorry I gave the impression of boorishness, Margaret Fell. The fact that I failed to rise and bow is part of my testimony.'

She knew that if she wanted him to leave she should be firm now and not let herself be drawn into an argument. But she could not resist asking, 'And what would your testimony be?'

'All men and all women have that of God in them, which will respond when appealed to by that of God in myself. For me to bow or doff my hat would be to deny that of God in thee. I would be honouring thee not as a unique, irreplaceable person who has never been on earth before and never will be again, but as a symbol, wife of Judge Thomas Fell, mistress of Swarthmoor Hall.'

'And on what, pray, do you base your authority to pronounce all this?'

He looked at her with utter serenity. He was unlike other

preachers; as a matter of fact, he was unlike any other man she knew.

'Why don't we share a moment of silence before I answer that question? Let us ask the Lord to reveal why He chose to send me to Swarthmoor Hall. Come.'

The last thing she wanted to do was kneel beside this unsettling young man with the whole house watching them. But to put him in his place was one thing, to turn down a call to prayer another. She doubted that God would use these means to communicate His wishes to her, but you never knew. She compromised by sitting down beside him. 'When did the notion to come here first strike you, Mr. Fox?'

'Two weeks ago in Derby jail.'

A jailbird! This was serious. She wondered how she could prevail on one of the children to go and alert Thomas Woodhouse without arousing the man's suspicon. 'Is that so? What put you there, may I ask?'

'Blasphemy.'

'Who was the justice who sentenced you?'

'Gervase Bennett. I am afraid I made things worse for myself by calling him Jerry.'

'You don't say?' she said blandly. She knew all the judges; among them Sir Gervase was the last to take kindly to impertinence from a prisoner in the dock. This should have been obvious to the most obtuse miscreant; the fact that this odd young man had so blithely brought about his own doom seemed, somehow, reassuring. 'What in the world made you do such a foolish thing? What is the point of insulting a judge about to sentence you?'

'I was not insulting him. I was trying to reach that of God in him, hidden behind all those barriers.'

'Which barriers?'

'A powdered wig, a scarlet robe, a woolsack.'

'But those are symbols of his office!'

'They turned him into a symbol too. As he sat there looking down on me, he did not hold himself personally accountable for his judgments. To Justice Gervase Bennett, goodness, kindness, compassion, regard for a prisoner's humanity had no place in his decisions; he could hang a human being without compunction. Jerry would never dream of doing such a thing; he would be unable to do it. For me to have accepted the symbol would have meant to betray that of God within him. So I called him Jerry

and told him that the day would come when he too would quake in the presence of the Lord.'

'How interesting. And what was his reaction?'

'He said, "Take the quaker away!" The name "quaker" stuck; all Children of the Light are now called "quakers". But he could not undo what I had done to him.'

'What was that?'

'I had set him free.' He corrected himself. 'No, not I. Like a chick breaking out of an egg, he pierced his shell himself, from within. After that there was no going back.'

'How do you know all this?'

'He told me.'

She managed to hide her bewilderment. 'When?'

'Later, in Derby jail. He had me put in the foulest cell, to break my spirit. But the more I was brutalised, the brighter the Light within me began to shine, the more I felt free . . .'

The things he was saying were outrageous. Free from what? Duty? Social conventions? He was free the way a bird in the sky was free. What would have become of her, had she renounced all laws and restrictions of society at his age? How old could he be? Twenty-five, twenty-six? Suddenly she seemed to catch an inarticulate, sensuous whiff of the freedom he was describing. She was thirty-eight; an old woman in the eyes of society. She accepted that her life was over for the simple reason that everybody said it was. Yet an entire lifetime still seemed ahead of her . . .

She gazed at his manly, almost noble face. That was it! He must be the younger son of a nobleman. He had never known what it was to be socially inferior; that explained his supreme self-confidence. For a young lord not to remove his hat and to call a baronet Jerry was not rebellion.

'What do your parents have to say about all this?' she asked.

He fell silent in the midst of a sentence. It had been uncivil of her to show she had not been listening, but it did not seem to upset him. 'In the beginning they were disturbed,' he said, 'but now they have accepted my mission.'

'Who is your father, Mr. Fox?'

'He is a weaver.'

A weaver! This boy had no business behaving as if he were her equal. 'I am sorry I interrupted you. Is there anything else you feel you must tell me before luncheon?' She realised too late this meant a meal before she could show him the door.

'I should like to finish telling this one incident, as it brought about the convincement of the warden of Derby jail. So, I watched from my cell window as they dragged the screaming woman across the courtyard towards the gallows. She struggled; they struck her, but she would not be silent. When they reached the ladder to the scaffold, she managed to hang on to one of the rungs, screaming. One of the henchmen climbed on to the scaffold from the back and pulled her up; the other one pushed. They managed to drag her to the gallows and to put the noose around her neck. She began to cry for her mother, for someone called "Harry", for Jesus, whom she begged to come and save her. Hanging on to the bars of my cell window, I watched, in agony; then the power of the Lord came over me.'

She stared at him, frowning. 'What do you mean?'

'I cannot describe it. A tremendous strength arose in me, but it was not mine. It burst forth from me like ... like ... I don't know how to describe it.'

'Try.'

'An immense feeling of mercy, not for the woman, but for the men who were about to hang her. *They* were about to fall into damnation, not she. I wanted to stop them, but the only way I could reach them was with my voice. That of God within me burst forth in one word, "*Stop!*" It flashed across the courtyard like an arrow, pierced the wall behind which that of God in the men lay buried, fused with it, and the power of the Lord tore them asunder.'

'How?'

'They tried for half an hour, but they did not have the power to hang that woman. In the end they had to take her back to her cell. That same night the warden, who had been there, came to see me. We talked and prayed and worshipped; the next day he moved into my cell.'

'The warden of Derby jail?!'

'He did his work during the day, but slept in my cell. We talked for hours every evening; he stayed until I was released, nine months later.'

She gazed at him incredulously. But she had sensed his power when he shouted '*Stop!*' She too would have been incapable of acting against his will. It was disturbing, but intriguing; part of her would love to find herself reduced to helpless submission to a man's sovereignty. Because her husband was rarely home, she had been a leader all her married life; even as a child it had not

been she who obeyed, but everyone else, including her father, God rest his soul. What luxury it would be to let someone else take the lead for a while.

'Shall we go in to luncheon?' She rose.

He held her back by putting a hand on her arm, not forcefully; the thought simply did not enter his head that she might refuse to do his bidding. 'Before we go in, let us have a moment of worship.'

'Here?'

'Why not? "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am, in the midst of them." Nowhere did Christ say that this miracle could take place only in certain buildings, at certain hours, under the supervision of hireling priests. Let us worship God where He is: here.'

She had recovered. 'I am sorry, Mr. Fox, but I do prefer to worship in the proper place.'

'In thy steeplehouse, on First Days only?'

'The least our heavenly Father may expect from us is courtesy, wouldn't you think?'

He looked at her with benign amusement. He really was insufferable. 'Dear Margaret, dost thou realise that the God thou servest has been created by thee, after thy own image: a stern, benevolent administrator in an office in the sky?'

She could see now why he had been condemned to prison for blasphemy. 'Where else, pray, would you allow me to situate my Creator?'

'Within thyself.'

'Pardon?'

'Part of thee, yet not thine.'

'I see. Like my stomach. Priest Lampitt's belly.'

'Not like thy stomach. He is a spirit; He cannot be defined. But if thou seekest an analogy, He is more like thy unborn children.'

'I *beg* your pardon?'

'Part of thee, yet not thine; future human beings whose identity is still in the mind of God. Shall we worship?'

She rose, deeply offended. 'I am sorry, I do not feel disposed to join in a blasphemous adoration of my intestines.'

His face darkened. 'That, Margaret, was blasphemous! Do not rile at the spirit of the Eternal thy humanity allows thee to carry!'

'I am not riling at the Eternal, Mr. Fox! I am riling at *you*, at

your — your impudence! I'll thank you to leave my house, now!'

He smiled, unruffled. 'Come. Thou art, in thy heart, yearning for the experience.'

'Which experience, for God's sake?!'

'The experience of the presence of God. Come, sit with me. Be still; listen to the voice of God within thee. Thou wilt hear Him, thou wilt feel Him rise within thee, if only thou wilt set Him free.'

His obvious sincerity made her hesitate; then she decided she would give him this one chance. She sat down again. 'Now, then. What am I supposed to do?'

'Relax thy body as well as thy mind. Put thy feet together, like this. Settle thy body comfortably, so it will have no cause for restlessness. Put thy hands in thy lap.'

She found herself obeying his instructions.

'Now put thy mind at rest. Close out all thoughts.'

She tried, and discovered that she had no thoughts, only awareness: of his presence beside her, the bees buzzing among the flowers, the scent of roses.

'Be still,' he whispered, as if in reverence, 'silence and small thoughts that babble in thy mind. Be still! Wait upon the Lord . . .'

His faith in his own brand of magic was so persuasive that she closed her eyes and lifted her face, trying to eradicate her awareness of the world around her. The bright sunlight shone red through her eyelids. Impish little thoughts danced through her mind. 'My unborn children! How dare he! Are my born children still watching?' She managed to banish them, until there was nothing except the red sunlight in her eyes. She lowered her head to close out even that.

In the darkness, slow-moving, luminous shapes advanced on her as her eyes recovered from the light. Pink blotches, opening up as they approached. Pink flowers, exposing round red seeds. She folded her hands tightly, tried to concentrate; suddenly she recognised the red round seeds: Morocoo plums! Henderson must have assumed they were meant for luncheon for everybody! She must get up at once and tell her that they were very expensive and intended for the judge.

She opened her eyes and glanced at him. He was sitting, head lifted, eyes open, gazing at the clouds. There was something very young about him. She cleared her throat and smoothed her skirt;

he looked at her as if he had been miles away. 'I'm sorry, Mr. Fox,' she said, 'I'm afraid I'm no good at this.' She rose. 'Now may I invite you to our table, before you travel on?'

'Do not feel discouraged, Margaret,' he said. 'It takes time. Before that of God can rise within thee, thou must accept thyself as thou art.'

'Quite. Now shall we partake of some sustenance?'

He rose at last. She was a little disappointed to find that he was shorter than she. She led the way to the hall, worrying about the comments the children might make at table. How could she explain the scene to them? 'We joined in a brief supplication of our Lord for the safe return of your father . . .' What on earth made her want to lie? What was there to be secretive about?

As they entered the cool, dark house, she wondered why she should have such an odd feeling of guilt.

As they entered the dining-hall where her daughters, the tutor, her son George and Thomas Woodhouse were waiting for them, she met the young man's companion for the first time. His name was Richard Hubberthorne; a frail young man, simply dressed, obviously of even humbler background. He too omitted to remove his hat, but it seemed to make him uncomfortable.

She was getting tired of the pious offensiveness of the pair; her young son George, obviously, felt more strongly. He swept his plumed hat, which he must have put on especially for the visitors, made a leg and said proudly, 'Gentlemen, your humble servant.'

Fox said, 'God bless thee, friend.' The other said nothing, but just stood there, all hat.

'This is my son, Master George Fell,' she said lightly. 'George, these two gentlemen are on their way north and will do us the honour of sharing our table before they continue on their way.'

Fox, impervious to innuendo, made matters worse by smiling down upon the boy and saying, 'George, eh? How old art thou?'

'Thirteen, sir,' George answered, his nostrils sharpening. 'Thank you, sir, for your kind interest. Mother, may I have the honour?' He executed another bow and sweep, a little less successfully this time and offered his arm to guide her to the head of the table.

'Thank thee, George,' she said gratefully, hoping to smooth his ruffled feathers.

He led her to her chair, bowed again, bowed to his sister Isabel, who snickered, and sat down, outraged adolescence personified. She thought of asking him to say grace in the absence of his father, but that would constitute an insult to her visitors, who as men of God, be it self-styled, should be granted that privilege. 'Will you do us the honour of speaking the blessing, Mr. Fox?' she asked.

George Fox looked about him questioningly. 'Are thy servants not to join us?'

She felt the un-Christian impulse to slap his face, but the sight of her children, waiting on the edge of their seats for the sparks to fly, restrained her. 'I am sorry, Mr. Fox, that is not the custom in this house. I am sure that Thomas Woodhouse, our steward, will be happy to conduct you to the kitchen, should you so desire, after the meal.' She folded her hands and closed her eyes as a pointed invitation to him to get on with it.

Instead of the time-hallowed words, she heard him say, 'Let us join hands and wait upon the Lord.' She opened her eyes and saw he was holding out his hand to her. Reluctantly she put her right hand in his, her left in that of his companion on her other side. The children followed their example, young George consenting only after she had given him an ominous look. She waited with mounting impatience for the unfortunate young man to speak, but he said nothing. He just sat there, eyes closed, holding her hand; the other was being held by the horny paw of the creature on her left. They sat like this for an inordinately long time. She expected the children to become restless, but they seemed to quieten down instead; there came a moment of absolute stillness that had about it an unexpected sense of tenderness and peace. She could have sat like this a while longer when he said, 'Amen', and released her hand. His companion followed suit; Isabel released her pent-up giggles in a clumsy pretence of blowing her nose. She would have to have a word with that young woman.

Yet it was as if irritation and hostility had been swept from the atmosphere; the rest of the meal was pleasant. Only afterwards, when she offered her guests a glass of sherry in the hall, did the awkwardness return. They refused the wine, barely consented to listen to the girls sing a madrigal, 'The Andalusian Merchant', which they were rehearsing for their father's return; then Fox rose and said, 'I would be happy now if thy steward would guide me to the kitchen.'

She had suggested it herself, so all she could do was smile and nod to Thomas Woodhouse. The moment they were gone, the children burst out chattering like an aviary; she silenced them and expounded the principles of hospitality and good manners.

'And what does one do in the face of deliberate rudeness?' young George asked. He was nursing his grievance with dark voluptuousness, like his father, who sometimes would brood for days as a result of some slight, real or imaginary.

'Their use of "thou" does not imply disrespect,' she replied carefully. 'It is an expression of their religious convictions.'

Meg asked, 'How?' So she found herself forced to expound Fox's subversive theories. The children went on pressing her with questions; in the end she lost her temper and cried irritably, 'Why don't you ask our guests?'

They did just that. The moment George Fox came back after whatever he had been up to in the kitchen, Isabel tackled him as if he were a new tree to climb; before long he was holding forth at the children the way he had held forth at their mother in the garden. She had planned to make it plain that she expected him and his friend to be on their way before nightfall, but she could hardly interrupt this discussion without being ungracious. By the time he began to lose his audience it was too late for him and his companion to arrive at the next manor at an acceptable hour; as a result, she had to invite them to supper as well.

That night, when the candles were lit and the children were about to bid them good night, Fox sprang the suggestion that the servants join them for an hour of worship. This was customary only at Christmastime, when the symbolical meaning of the occasion was so obvious that it could not possibly put ideas into their heads. But as he had obviously been up to no good in the servants' quarters earlier that day, she thought it might be an effective antidote if she allowed it, as a sort of spiritual fire drill.

So they all gathered in the candlelight in the drawing-room, every soul who lived under the roof of the House of Swarthmoor. At Christmas they usually sang a carol together, so she asked for a hymn; Fox answered that true worship did not need hymns, although anyone among them who might feel moved to sing during the next hour should feel free to do so. Their worship would be silent; anyone present could pray, speak, or whatever the Spirit might lead them to do, on condition that each ministry

was brief and was followed by a long period of silence. 'Now, let us wait upon the Lord.'

He sat down. The poor servants did not know what to do; to lower their humble posteriors on to their master's furniture was, despite all dreams of equality, an emotional impossibility. Most of them followed the example of Henderson, the henchwoman, who, with the intelligence that had secured her position for her, sat down on the floor. Only Ann Traylor, the governess, and Mabby, the scullery maid, sat on chairs — the Traylor girl because she had delusions of grandeur, Mabby because she was too stupid to know better.

The gathering fell silent. It was a restless silence; poor Will Caton was plagued by a bout of extraordinarily loud stomach rumbles. The gurglings and barkings reverberated preposterously in the silence, making him scarlet with embarrassment; his hands, folded in prayer, went white at the knuckles, his eyeballs rolled behind his closed eyelids in an agony of mortification, until he looked like a bullfrog about to have a fit. Isabel started shaking with suppressed laughter that finally erupted snottily through her nose.

Suddenly, George Fox spoke. His voice was quiet, without the theatrical solemnity considered fitting by other priests. 'Listening to the sounds of our friend's digestion brings the thought that these must have been the first sounds the newborn Jesus heard as He lay, blind and bewildered, in the manger among the cattle.'

Had any of the preachers who had preceded him over the years said this, it would have sounded ludicrous, but the image of the newborn infant, blind and bewildered, was placed among them with such evocative power that Will Caton could go on gurgling and burbling without causing any further hilarity; his stomach rumbles were magically transformed into ministry.

Suddenly a high-pitched voice yammered, 'Oh, God! Jesus! Dear God! Forgive me that I sit here thinking those sinful things! Forgive me, Christ Jesus, sweet Jesus! I want to pray to Thee, I — I — we must — I — I must sing! I must sing! Jesus, I — "*Heavenly Father, Holy Ghost, Precious Saviour and Thy Host . . .*" ' It was Mabby, the scullery maid, shaking like a leaf, swaying on her feet, bawling her head off.

Margaret looked about her; to her astonishment, none of her children seemed to be fighting giggles. They all sat quietly, either with their eyes demurely downcast or watching Mabby with fascination; none of them seemed outraged by her disgraceful

exhibition. She sang the entire hymn from beginning to end; then she sat down, quivering like a jelly.

What had brought about this strange outburst? All they were doing was to sit in total silence, like people waiting for the mail coach. Yet there was tension among them, an excitement that seemed to feed on some insubstantial fuel drawn from their very souls. Was it their souls? Mabby's behaviour had been anything but soulful. Then a new voice intruded upon her thoughts; this time it was Henderson, of all people.

'When I was a little girl, my mother used to sing a ditty in the kitchen,' the henchwoman said in a soft, dreamlike tone that had nothing to do with prayer or devotion. 'It ran: "Lord, temper with tranquillity our manifold activity, and let me do my work for Thee in silence and simplicity." ' There was a pause; the woman sat, eyes tightly closed, hands folded, as if she were formulating some thought; but she said no more.

How was it possible that the servants spoke so freely, without waiting for the family to speak first? How right, Margaret thought, her husband had been when he said that Cromwell was stirring up more than a religious revolution. It had never occurred to her that a time might come when she would sit in her own drawing-room listening to a couple of wenches sounding off like drunkards. Her family suddenly seemed an apprehensive minority; the balance must be redressed somehow. It was ludicrous to leave the speaking to the servants.

She did not give anyone else the chance to continue this perilous parlour game. 'Heavenly Father! We are grateful for the inspiration Thou hast granted us tonight. But, even as with earthly food, Thy heavenly fare can only be digested if we know when to rise from table in humble gratitude, lest our hunger turn into gluttony. So we thank Thee for the presence of Thy servants George Hubberthorne and Richard Fox, whom we shall sorely miss tomorrow. Let us now return with gratitude to our daily lives inspired, as we were reminded tonight, by the desire to do our work for Thee in silence and simplicity. For the sake of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, Amen.' She rose, smiling seraphically; but again Fox held out his hands, forcing all those present, servant and children alike, to form a circle.

Despite this last effort at subversion, her speech had had a sobering effect. The servants, back in reality, retired after mumbling their thanks to her with a bow or curtsy. When the last of them was gone she said, smiling, 'Thomas Woodhouse, pray

show the guests to their quarters for the night. Sleep well, gentlemen.'

After that, even Fox could not think of a device to linger. Before following the steward, he looked at her with those eyes full of awareness and said, 'Be watchful, friend Margaret; the day of the Lord cometh as a thief in the night.'

An hour later she made the rounds of the children's rooms, let the cat into the servants' quarters for the night and carried the little pug with her to her bedchamber, as was her custom when her husband was away. She was about to blow out the candle on the landing when a voice called softly from the shadows, 'Mother?'

It was young George. He emerged from the children's wing like a miniature replica of his father, complete with spurred boots, little sword, velvet breeches and plumed hat. He looked as if he were about to go hunting.

'Why art thou not undressed?' she asked. She tried hard not to treat him as a child, but when he marched about the house at dead of night fully dressed with his hat on, it was hard to do otherwise.

'When are those men going away?'

'What is that to thee?'

'In the absence of my father,' he said pompously, 'it is my duty to see to it that nobody opportunes my mother, my sisters or any members of this household.'

'Opportunes? What dost thou mean?'

'I do not think Father would approve of what went on here tonight.'

'What? Thou meanst the prayer meeting?'

He stretched to his full height, which was not very high as yet, and clutched the handle of his sword. 'If that was a prayer meeting,' he said loftily, 'then I am a volcano.'

It would have rekindled her hopes for his originality had she not known that Will Caton had spent the day discussing earthquakes and their origins.

'I think it's bedtime for volcanoes,' she said, casting to the wind her decision to do the right thing by him. She added insult to injury by pulling his hat over his nose, turning him round and slapping his buttocks. 'If there's any protesting to be done in this house, it will be I who do it, not my children. Good night.'

He stood still, trying to express defiance, but his fragile

moment of virility had run its course. 'Thou hadst better run, for I'm going to blow out the candle,' she added. When he did not move, she did. He would have to find his way back in the dark.

She entered her room, closed the door behind her and listened at the crack. She had handled him ineptly, but whenever they challenged her authority she instantly forgot that she was dealing with children. That very morning she had caught herself crying at five-year-old Mary, 'Oh, don't be childish!' With a mixture of regret and relief she heard his shuffling steps go down the landing. At least it saved her from trying to explain to the child something she did not understand herself. Why did she feel so unsure of herself in the face of that young preacher? He seemed different from the others, but was he just another demagogue or a true man of God? How could one know? For the second time that day she wished that her husband were home. He would know, his understanding of human nature was prodigious. Maybe the fact that she had bought those Morocco plums was indeed an omen. He might be back this very night; the tide would turn at midnight and there would be a full moon.

She undressed modestly, with her back to the steel mirror, and put on her nightgown. Then she took it off again and put on the one with the silk ribbons and the matching cap; if he indeed came in at dead of night, the sight of her should be pleasing. She knelt by the side of the bed, mumbled her evening prayer; then she raised her gown, showing the whiteness of shapely calves, and climbed into bed.

The moment she settled down in the pillows the little dog jumped on to the bed and settled on her feet. 'Oh, for Peter's sake, Mongol!' she cried. 'Go back to thy basket!' The pug peered at her over the soft embankment of the eiderdown like a frog from a pond. 'Get off, little monster!' She tried giving him a sharp kick from below, but it was not possible through two blankets and an eiderdown. Mongol, snorting asthmatically through his fashionably short snout, collapsed and curled up in the hollow between her feet.

She sighed, took the Bible from the bedside table, opened it at random and read some chapter, thinking at the same time about the curtains of the bed of the two youngest girls that should be lined against the summer sunlight or they would be waking up too early. She was pleasantly conscious of the warmth of the little dog between her feet, the fragrance of pomandered oranges from

the bed linen and the drowsiness that crept over her while the solemn admonitions of the Prophet Amos reverberated harmlessly in her somnolent mind. Finally she closed the book, put it back on the bedside table, snuffed the candle and stretched her limbs luxuriously under the sheets. The memory of the candle flame roamed inside her closed eyelids, then darkness slowly doused it. Ah, the delight of drifting off to sleep, sprawled wide in the warm bed, alone . . . A small feeling of guilt raised its drowsy head that she should enjoy her husband's absence; she tried to formulate a loving prayer for his safekeeping, but did not finish it. She was asleep, asleep, lovely, lovely sleep.

Amidst the twilit flittings of a meaningless summer dream a door slowly opened. She must be half awake, for she knew she was lying in bed, arms and legs flung out, only there was no door at the foot of the bed. Yet the wall opened, blinding sunlight blazed forth, and she became aware of a man standing in the lighted doorway, gazing at her; the sun behind him was too bright for her to see his features. She was about to cry out, 'Dear heart!' and open her arms for her husband when it penetrated to her that it was not he. The intruder's hair was fair, his shoulders were powerful. He stood gazing at her, legs planted apart, and suddenly she realised who it was. Seeing him there filled her with the frantic desire to wake up; she tried to gather her limbs, but felt, with terror, that she was paralysed by a dead weight on her feet. He slowly advanced on her, wading ashore from an ocean of light. She cried, 'What do you want?!'

He stood still at the foot of the bed, gazed down on her and said, '*I have come to confound the priests.*' The blasphemy gave her the strength to recoil; she was awakened by the yapping of the dog, in a tangle of sheets, her gown twisted around her waist. She lay half out of the bed, clutching the curtain; Mongol, snorting and slobbering, rummaged behind her.

The dream had been so vivid, his presence so real, that she stumbled towards the window, groping for the reality of her house, her children, her husband, God. Moonlight slanted through the slatted shutters; she opened them and stood, eyes closed, letting the coolness of the night wash over her.

She looked at the sky, the stars glittering coldly in infinity. She felt like praying, but her words would be lost in the immensity of the night. No tender concern for a fallen sparrow emanated from the icy stars, the bottomless void; all she could sense out there was an awesome, impersonal indifference – the indifference

of unimaginable vastness for her unimaginable smallness.

Suddenly she was moved to whisper at the night, 'God? God, look at me. It's Maggie . . .' She turned away as she realised what the stars saw, if they could be bothered: an old woman in a window, asking God to call her Maggie.

She lit the candle, climbed back into bed, pushed Mongol over the edge, took her Bible and opened it once more.

'For your souls know perfectly that the Day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, "peace and safety", then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child, and they shall not escape.'

She raised her eyes and looked at the wall, where the door had been.

CHAPTER TWO

THE next morning, as they broke their fast, Margaret Fell invited George Fox and his companion to accompany the family to church. He replied that he must do whatever the Lord might require of him, took leave of her and walked out into the garden.

It was a warm sunny morning; the birds were singing, all nature seemed to be awakening. The orchard looked inviting; he waded through the high grass, still wet with dew, and sat down underneath an apple tree, out of sight from the house. Dew was everywhere; all about him bees were drying their wings with busy buzzing; a finch carolled in the branches, making a joyful noise unto the Lord.

Leaning against the tree, head back, eyes closed, wrists resting on his knees, he let all tribulations, all trivialities of daily life drop away from him until there was nothing but the present, nothing but stillness, in which he waited, passively, for that of God to rise within him. As a youth he had prayed, pleaded, beseeched God to manifest Himself; only in prison had he learned how to let God use him as an instrument, avail Himself of his thoughts by directing them. That was the secret: utter passiveness, which could only be achieved by complete surrender of the will. Mysteriously, that state of complete surrender manifested itself by a sudden feeling of power, a surging joy, that

always preceded the indefinable but unmistakable presence of God.

Again, that morning, it happened, but not until the last preoccupation with himself had been relinquished: the wish for understanding, for a glimpse, however fleeting, of the purpose of his coming to Swarthmoor Hall. Once he had let go of even that and said, 'Thy will be done, Thine only', the Light within suddenly dawned with growing radiance, like a sunrise. He felt the Power fill his soul, his mind; in joy and awe he waited for the first thought to rise, for the voice to whisper, which would be his own, yet not his alone. Thy will be done. Thine. Thine only.

The bees buzzed. The finch above him rustled and left. The melodious wingbeat of a flight of pigeons whisked overhead. The scent of dew evaporating in the sun became stronger. Beyond the orchard, out on the fells, a lark began its jubilant ascent. God's Spirit was upon the land; all of nature was singing His praises. But no thoughts emanated from the centre of the stillness; no leading came to him from the depth of his soul, only a feeling of power and peace. Then, out of nowhere, came an image. A spire. A word: steeplehouse.

He waited, but no other images, no other words came out of the stillness. Steeplehouse. That was all. He sat there for a while longer, in silent adoration of the Presence. Then, filled with light and love, he rose. Nobody had left yet; he was the first worshipper to arrive at Ulverston church. He tethered his horse to the fence, went into the graveyard and stood among the tombstones in prayer, an alien figure in shepherd's clothes and a white hat. No one on his way into the church could fail to see him, and although he looked lost to the world, he saw them. He saw the priest arrive from the vicarage across the graveyard. He saw Margaret Fell arrive with her children in two coaches, the little boy trailing them on his pony. He saw a four-in-hand roll up with high-stepping horses and, inside, a portly man and a woman wearing a high, modish wig with a little dog on a pillow on her lap. As she glanced at him he recognised her as the wife of the coroner in whose stable he had slept after crossing the sands. He saw Richard Hubberthorne arrive on his patient old mare, which he tethered to the fence next to his own.

When the last of the worshippers had entered he remained behind, alone among the tombstones. Inside, an organ struck a deep and mournful chord; the congregation started to sing, *'Here in Thy house, O Lord of Hosts . . .'*

After a last prayer: '*Thine only, Thine only*', he slowly went into the steeplehouse.

* * *

Like everybody else in the church, Henrietta Best had been waiting for George Fox to come in. The rumour that he made a practice of interrupting services had been all over the town. When he did, she was struck by the perfect timing of his entrance.

He had been standing in the graveyard like a prima donna in the wings, waiting for the congregation to sing its first hymn in order that his entrance would be savoured and his appearance drunk in by the enraptured audience. What was it Delange had cried in the theatre room of the Louvre? 'Never rush on to the stage, please! When you enter, be it *côté jardin* or *côté cour*, always stand still for a few seconds so the spectators may take in your appearance before the action starts. Now, will you do that over again, *chère*?'

Unconsciously, she trembled with apprehension. She became aware of it through the shivering of the little dog on the pillow on her lap; she always communicated her moods to Froufrou before she was aware of them herself. While the hymn, somewhat raggedly, was bawled to its conclusion by the preoccupied congregation, she did what Delange had wanted from the audience: she took in Fox's appearance. Two days earlier in her kitchen she had hardly looked at him, so upset had she been by the child's scream; now she could observe him at her ease. His appearance, carefully calculated to arouse disapproval, was that of a shepherd, complete with floppy hat. She wondered whether the people in this Godforsaken town knew of the fashion for shepherds that had swept the French court about a decade ago; tired of war and heroics, fashion had turned away from the knight errant and the *chevalier* to a symbol of more peaceable yearnings. By the time she had left Paris even the most notorious rakes, who would duel at the drop of a rose, came to the park in the misty morning garbed in the disguise of the harmless shepherd, floppy hat, leather breeches, homespun cloak and all, exactly like the man who now stood in the aisle facing the pulpit, fixing Priest Lampitt with the baleful stare of his hypnotic eyes. Strange, that this should happen again; she wondered if twenty-eight years ago she would have been smitten with this one too. It was hardly likely, so obvious were the histrionics.

The hymn over, Priest Lampitt, his voice trembling slightly, his face a little more drawn than usual, spoke a prayer, for which the man in the aisle conspicuously removed his hat, thus — like any consummate actor — using the speech of his antagonist to draw the more attention to himself. After the 'Amen', a passage was read from the Scriptures. *'Come to Me and I will give you sustenance. Come to Me and I will give you bread.'*

The congregation coughed, shuffled, settled down; just as poor Lampitt took breath for the start of his sermon, the stranger in the aisle queried, 'Is this a sermon for hireling priests only?'

The commotion among the congregation was not one of surprise, but of excitement. All heads craned in his direction, all attention was drawn away from the poor, talentless man in the pulpit. What an opening! And what a magnificent voice! Despite her detestation of all he stood for, Henrietta felt a twinge of admiration that only great artists of the theatre could provoke. It was the cue for Priest Lampitt, but he bungled it; he just stood there, pin-eyed and paralysed. The man in the aisle timed the exact moment to resume speaking. 'If not, friend Lampitt, what nonsense art thou talking! The only ones who receive bread and sustenance from the words of the Lord are those who use them to make a living!' Not what he said, although it was outrageous enough, but the way he said it hit her and the rest of the audience in the solar plexus. His voice, deep and stirring, achieved what the dreary tootling of the church organ had failed to do: it created an atmosphere of drama and brought about a heightened awareness. If she read the play right, there should now be an effort by some minor character to bar the hero's way, if only to enhance the sense of drama by turning the audience from spectators into participants.

Sure enough, there came a crowing voice, thin and pedantic in the taut silence: 'Take that man away!' It was Junior Justice Sawrey, pompous little fool. He fitted the role perfectly — it almost looked as if he were in league with the actor. Everybody in town disliked him heartily; even those who might have vacillated would now feel irresistibly drawn towards the man in the aisle.

Then a woman's voice cried out, quite close, 'Let him be! He has a right to speak!'

It was Mistress Fell. She had risen in the squire's pew near the pulpit and made a commanding figure in her costly gown, showing to their full advantage her statuesque body and the swanlike grace of her aristocratic neck. Of course, the man was her guest

and Lampitt in her pay; in the absence of her husband, she could not let little Sawrey rule the roost.

The priest, more eager to please the wife of the Lord Chief Justice than a junior judge, replied, 'He may speak. And let me remind you, dear brethren in Christ, that we must not let ourselves be led astray by personalities or emotions, but at all times turn to the Scriptures for guidance.' It was a muddled effort to re-establish his authority by identifying himself, somewhat obscurely, with the Lord; the man in the aisle gave short shrift to him by latching on to his words.

'It is not the Scriptures which give guidance, but the Holy Spirit which inspired them! I say unto you that the same Holy Spirit that once inspired those who wrote down the words of God still inspires us today! If the Scriptures are indeed God's words spoken to man, then He is still speaking to us today! But do you hear Him? Your worship is but the repetition of other men's words; you do not listen to the Spirit speaking within yourselves. For He *is* speaking, right now! Not to Christianity, or the Independent Church, or the congregation of Ulverston, but to each of you individually, man, woman, child, priest here, now. Yes! His voice speaks in the heart of everyone here, *now*, and the voice says "Christ says this, Paul says that, but what dost *thou* say?" ' He pointed at the mistress of Swarthmoor Hall, who sat looking down on him from the high pew of honour with a haughty stare. He kept pointing at her, heightening the tension to an almost unbearable degree, then he cried, 'Thieves! We are all thieves! We have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them within ourselves! But it is written: there will be a shepherd, and the sheep shall follow him, for they will know his voice!'

Aha, Henrietta Best thought, there we have it, the old recipe. For a few minutes, swept along by his power and his consummate skill, the idea of throwing the responsibility for listening to a speaking God back at each individual of the congregation had seemed magnificent; but now there had to be a shepherd, and guess who it would be. Of course the sheep would follow him, for they knew his voice; only, it was the voice of the devil, of communal madness, of the dark desire locked up in all men for death and destruction. That was the conclusion she had come to twenty-four years ago.

She looked at the congregation, letting the words of the glorious voice roll off her. Bowled over by the great actor, un-

mistakably, were the women. The men sat glowering at him with sullen anger; the women's faces expressed a fascination that ran from wary interest to rank rapture. She glanced at the mistress of the House of Swarthmoor and noticed that she was no exception. The man's assault had been concentrated on her; there she sat, eyes bright, lips parted, cheeks flushed, to all the world a tender soul deeply moved by a spiritual message. To all the world except to one who had been married to someone like him. When Henrietta herself had been in the throes of spiritual rapture, it had never occurred to her that what she felt might have less to do with God, Christ or the Holy Ghost than with a magnificent male's overwhelming masculinity. At that time she had not possessed the experience that life was to impart to her later; yet, though she had come to know every aspect of carnal passion in all its delirious frenzy, she had never quite understood the mysterious relationship between saintliness and lust. What gave this irresistible seductiveness to sanctity? Why did a woman respond to passionate spirituality in a man more rapturously and recklessly than to any of the more obvious attributes? Flattery and flowers, compliments and gallantries, chivalry and courage were like chaff before the whirlwind of true spirituality. Look at the Fell woman: spellbound, bewitched by that indomitable male drunk with God. What made an astute, imperious person like her respond to the man's blatant virility with the instinctive desire to conquer him? Was it the challenge to take on God? Was that what had happened in Paradise? 'I'll make him love me, not above all other women, that is easy; I will take on God, who makes him radiate with love and shine with passion, who fills him with that breathtaking power, now wasted on stupid people in stuffy churches!'

Could it be that after all these years she was witnessing the same gruesome story starting all over again? No, no, not in this country. What had been possible in France could not happen here. This was England: insular, dull, but with a basic decency that rendered impossible excesses of cruelty, obscenity and destruction like the Night of St. Bartholomew, the fall of La Couvertoirade.

It all came flooding back — a wave of blackness and death. She nudged her husband and rose, handing him the pillow with Froufrou, overwhelmed by the irresistible urge to flee.

Despite the pillow with its frantic little occupant, Colonel Best managed to help her out of the pew, down the aisle, past the

roaring saint, into the open where the air was pure and the birds were singing in the trees of the graveyard.

* * *

The sudden commotion in the Best pew settled something for Margaret Fell. In her outrage at their protest against the young prophet, she suddenly knew what she had to do.

Until that moment she had let the man's power wash over her, almost sensuously, moved by the sheer beauty of it. He stood among the dun-coloured, shock-eyed creatures of Ulverston like a young god, visitor from another world. Power, courage, freshness did not adequately sum up the essence of his impact. He seemed to be the only human being in that church who was really alive. There was no doubt left in her mind: he *was* a man of God.

When Henrietta Best rose in protest and the unprepossessing couple banged and clunked down the aisle with their impossible little dog, she made up her mind. George Fox needed protection, now that the second most influential man in Ulverston had turned his back on him. She would provide it.

Priest Lampitt spoke the closing prayer as if it had been he who had been holding forth for the past hour instead of the broad-shouldered youth flushed with passion, eyes shining with the glory of the Lord. She rose; all waited respectfully for her to move down the aisle. In full view of everyone she took young Fox by the arm and said, 'I want a word with thee, friend George. Let us go outside.' She knew that this would set tongues wagging furiously, but she was sure now of what she must do. She had seven children to send into the world. Now, doubt had been sown in her soul as to the validity of the values she was imparting to them; they should not inherit a faith that had been shaken. It would take courage, but she must rise to the challenge of her doubt.

She did not wait for Lampitt, even though out of the corner of her eye she could see him trying to reach the door before she did. She led George Fox out into the graveyard and faced him with determination.

'Friend George, I have decided to give thy message a try. Tell me what to do, and I will do it. Thou wilt have to stay on to instruct me and my family, but that, I presume, is thy wish.'

He gazed at her with the look of utter perspicacity that had

unnerved her during their first meeting. 'Thou dost not need me, friend Margaret. All thou needest to receive God is to be truthful towards thyself.'

'Do not tell me what I need, George Fox,' she said with the voice that no one ever contradicted. 'I desire for thee to stay at Swarthmoor Hall until my family and myself shall be — what dost thou call it? — convinced.'

'Thou art convinced, Margaret,' he said calmly. 'Now put thy convincement into practice.'

She realised, with incredulous amazement, that he was about to turn his back on her and leave her standing there like any other persistent female. 'George!' she said with an urgency that she had not intended. 'I am sorry. I — I wish thee to stay because I need thee. We need thee! Thou canst not do this to — to people, arouse them, disturb them, put them at odds with the world they live in, and then turn away and leave them!'

'As I told thee, it is not I but God —'

'God, fiddlesticks!' she cried, realising too late that this was hardly the language of a convert. 'I am prepared to treat my servants as equals, to allow them to address me as "thou". We will hold meeting for worship every evening. I will instruct my children in the principles of thy persuasion. But in order to do so, I must know what those principles are!'

The way he looked at her made her realise, with a sinking feeling, that she had used exactly the same tone to him she used when she haggled with tradespeople.

'My principles, Margaret; Thou knowest them by now. Gather together with thy family and thy servants in His name, and He will be there, in the midst of you.'

People were coming out of the church. She was aware of how she must look to them: angry, pleading. 'But *how* do I put them into practice?' she asked with an edge of exasperation.

She saw from his expression that, despite his apparent involvement with her, he was utterly remote. 'The practice is simple,' he said. 'Mind the Light.' Then he turned away and walked towards the gate. It had sounded like a farewell, and she was convinced that was how he had meant it. But she knew that he would be back.

On the way home in her carriage, while the girls chatted excitedly about the adventurous morning and young George bobbed behind them on his pony, she wondered at her own certainty.

'Mother, do you know what he meant by "the inward light"?'

She looked at Isabel's innocent face. 'I think so,' she said. 'But before I tell thee: there is a new rule in the family. From now on you children shall address me as "thou". So will the servants, to whom we shall not refer as servants any longer. From now on we shall talk about friend Ann and friend — whatever Henderson's first name is. That goes for everyone, even Mabby.'

'But why?' Meg asked, alarmed.

'Because we are starting out, as a family, on a search for truth.'

* * *

Oh, the embarrassment, the shame of it all! Young George Fell, roaming the downs on Faggot a week later, was anguished. The household, the one stable element in his life, was in chaos. To have all the servants calling him 'thou' again for the first time since he was breeched, and meeting for worship every evening with everybody free to jump up and bellow as the spirit moved them was bad enough. But the night before Mabby had 'ministered' again, this time in response to Thomas Woodhouse, who had carried on in gory detail about Jesus' crucifixion and terrible suffering. Suddenly Mabby had leaped to her feet, eyes rolling, writhing and undulating in crazy contortions, screaming that she wanted to share Jesus' suffering, be nailed to the cross like Him, be struck by spears and bleed to death like her beautiful, beautiful Saviour. She began to foam at the mouth and to pull at her bodice, shrieking that clothes were an abomination, that all of them should rip off their garments and throw themselves on the floor, ready for the spears to pierce them. It looked as if she were about to do so, but Henderson put an arm around her and guided her, slobbering about Jesus, blood and spears, back to the kitchen.

At dead of night George was awakened by screams and shrieks in the courtyard. He stumbled to the window, stubbing his toe, but forgot the pain when he saw what was happening in the courtyard. The moon was full; in its light two white bodies were dancing and twirling. He did not recognise them at first, but as they pranced, hooting and squealing, towards his window he recognised Mabby and Harry Martin the stableboy. Neither of them had a stitch on, Harry as hairless as a slug, Mabby with bouncing breasts of surprising size, her hair loose, waving her

arms as if she were about to take off and fly. She shrieked about Jesus, blood, the Cross, beseeched somebody, anybody, to pierce her with a spear; Harry Martin bellowed about Jesus too, but without much variation. Suddenly he crashed into her and both of them tumbled to the ground; there they lay, wrestling and thrashing, trying to strangle each other. The courtyard filled with running shapes in nightclothes and loose breeches; someone threw a bucket of water over them; others pulled them apart and dragged them away, Mabby screaming and struggling, Harry Martin yelping like a dog as Will Hartford kicked him.

That had been last night; this morning, as George rode on the fells, Justice Sawrey had stopped him, with the ever present hulk of the constable in the distance. He had tried to pass with a mere greeting, but the judge had called, 'Stop!' and, as he drew up alongside him, 'Listen, boy. Your mother's friend has been causing trouble in Dalton, Aldringham, Dendron, Ramside Chapel. Now I have learned that he's on his way back here! Do you know that after what happened at your house last night your mother could be accused of witchcraft?'

It seemed impossible that anyone outside the household could know of the goings-on in the courtyard; Judge Sawrey was an awful man, and obviously out to make trouble. What would Father have done? Could he ride out and find him? Send a messenger? God, dear God, what could he do?

Never before had he been faced with a decision of such magnitude in such utter loneliness. If only there were someone, an uncle, a friend, someone who would take over the responsibility! The only one he could think of was Chief Justice Cartwright, whom his father visited regularly when he was home, but he lived miles away in Gleaston. It had to be someone in the neighbourhood, someone he knew personally, who knew him . . .

* * *

Colonel Best was in the process of being shaved by Bonbon, a daily ritual which started by his lying down in his shirtsleeves on the leather couch in his study while the eunuch put his tools at the ready: a bowl of hot water, razor, razor strop, lotions, soap scented with rose petals, towels. He grunted ungraciously, 'All right, get on with it' but once he lay on his back on that couch, eyes closed, and the smarmy little man began his ministrations, he was like an opium addict sensuously relishing the ritual. The creature began by covering his face with a steaming hot towel,

which, after resting on his bristles for a while, was gently removed, as a sculptor uncovers the first clay mould of a head. Then the feminine, caressing hands applied oil smelling of boudoirs, followed by another steaming towel, hotter than the first, and finally the lather that was brushed on with the voluptuous softness of an houri's caresses. As he lay there, his face buried in warm, scented foam, his body more sated and relaxed than in the afterglow of love, he heard the surreptitious squeaking of the razor stroking the strop. Then the delicate fingers of the creature gently pushed up his right sideburn to stretch the skin on his jaw, the harem voice whispered, 'All right, *patron*? and he grunted unpleasantly, to make up for his involuntary grin of well-being. The razor stroked down, softer than the tongue of the tenderest of women, and the voice asked, 'Does eet pull, *patron*?'

He growled, 'No, you idiot! Stop blathering and get on with it!' The steel, working so gently that he could barely feel it as it caressed his cheeks, started replacing the heat of the lather with the coolness of naked skin. Bonbon did a meticulous job, nipping even the furtive little hairs high on his cheekbones and underneath his Adam's apple; then, with the sound of two small perspiring bodies in the raptures of love, he slapped his obscene little hands with yet another secret ointment, an oil that smelled of leather and horses and wenches in the hay, the two lascivious flippers started to massage his face and he felt as if he were awakening from a depressing dream of old age and regret to the vigour of the youth he had once been, the dashing British rake abroad with the unwrinkled face that had dazzled a thousand wenches, full, sensuous lips and no bags under the once mischievious eyes that now had grown mournful and morose, like those of a bloodhound with nothing to trace. He was waiting for the third hot towel, when Thomas Fell's son was announced by Kathryn, the maid. He growled, 'Go away. Too early. Let him wait.'

'He says it's very urgent, sir,' the maid insisted, damn her hairy haunches.

He ripped the towel off his face, cried, 'I said, let him wait! and was about to throw it at her head when he saw the boy standing in the doorway, in a green velvet suit, hip boots with silver buckles, a miniature sword at his side.

He looked like some rich woman's plaything, but his face was hauntingly like his father's when he took off his plumed hat and swept it, mumbling, 'Your Honour, your obedient servant.' The

Colonel threw the towel at Bonbon instead, who was ogling the succulent little visitor with the hooded eyes of a lizard.

'*Mais, patron,*' the creature cried in his castrato tenor, 'won't you let me feenish while the little *monsieur* states his business?'

'Get out!' he cried, grateful for the chance to vent his irritation. 'Take thy mess away!'

'*Mais, patron!* Your *foulard* . . . your *plastron* . . .'

'I'll put them on myself!' He relished this display of virility, although it was a poor substitute for the rejuvenating ritual of the third towel. 'Now get out! Sit down, George Fell, there, take that chair. Forgive this domestic *brouhaha.*' He had intended to put the boy at ease, but he caught Bonbon's insolent mutter, '*Brouhaha, pardon . . .!*' which gave him the gratifying opportunity to kick him out of the room. Like a wily old mongrel bitch, the ninny squealed before his boot made contact, flitted out of the door, emitting shrieks of panic, but without spilling a single drop from the basin or leaving anything behind. He could hear him ululating as he leap-frogged through the drawing-room, obviously to ensure that his mistress would notice the commotion and later call her husband to task for brutalising so delicate and sensitive a person. He slammed the door on all pederasts and wenches and on the hope of getting shaved that day; then he turned to the boy, standing pale and insecure in front of the chair he had indicated. 'Sit down, sit down,' he repeated, going to the sideboard in the corner. 'How about a glass of sack, to start the day?'

'Thank you, sir.' The boy was not accustomed to drinking sack at nine o'clock in the morning; when handed the glass, he accepted it as if it were a little live animal. He looked as if he had not slept for days.

'I trust your gracious mother and sisters are doing well?'

If he had intended to postpone getting down to business, it had been the wrong question. Suddenly the boy blurted out, 'No, sir, no, not at all, sir, not at all! That's why I'm here, sir, I did not know where to turn — I mean, you as a friend of my father's — I mean, in his absence I must try and take his place . . .'

'Of course, of course,' he said with a smile, while his shrewd eyes observed the boy with fascination. He had heard rumours about hysterical goings-on at the Hall since that travelling preacher's visit, but had not paid much attention. 'I'll be glad to advise you, if I can,' he said, 'though I am sure that your father's place is most satisfactorily manned by you during his absence.'

At this, the boy recovered some of his composure; he even made a move as if to sip his wine, but thought better of it. 'I would not have op — importuned you, sir, if I hadn't been warned that — that the man has been causing trouble in Dalton and Aldringham and that he is on his way back here and that his converts may be accused of . . .'

'Of what?'

The boy cast a sidelong glance at the door, then he took a deep breath and said, 'Of — of witchcraft, sir.'

'Who said that?' He tried to keep up the tone of casual banter, but, suddenly, this was serious.

'Justice Sawrey, sir.'

'When?'

'This morning. We met out riding on the fells.' He added apologetically, 'I — I would not have bothered you with this, sir, but the fact that you and Mistress Best walked out of the service led me to believe . . .'

'Quite, quite,' he said. 'I'm glad you told me. But tell me a little more . . . What made Mr. Sawrey conclude that your gracious mother might be considered a convert?'

'Mother is very taken with what Fox said, sir; we now have prayer meetings with the servants every evening, and — and the servants seem a lot less respectful, sir.'

How young the boy was, yet how gallant! Best had no particular liking for Thomas Fell; the man had always seemed to him slightly inhuman. It was as if in the son he was suddenly given a glimpse of the true character of the father, sensitive and decent.

'The word "witchcraft" — is that what Justice Sawrey actually said?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Any idea why?'

'After — after what happened last night, I gather, sir . . .'

'What did happen?'

'Er — one of the maids and a stableboy danced in the yard — er — without — *in natura*, sir. I cannot understand how, but Justice Sawrey seems to have got wind of it.'

His first reaction was to send the boy home with some vague fatherly advice and wash his hands of the whole affair. But a neighbour's family was being threatened; there came a moment when all must stand up for one another or the violence that was sweeping the country would make short shrift of them. He must

try to stop Sawrey before he could do any more mischief.

He managed to reassure the boy but committed the error of saying, 'Don't drink that wine if you don't feel like it,' which of course made him gulp down the rest in one straight draught as if it were lemonade. By the time he rose to leave, young Fell was swaggering with self-confidence. He nearly knocked himself off his feet with the sweep of his hat, mounted his pony only after three lurching tries and rode off like a djinn, hoofs clattering, his hat bouncing on his back.

A quarter hour later Colonel William Best rode out himself, accompanied by his groom.

* * *

When her husband returned, Henrietta Best saw by the way he dismounted that something had upset him. Coming up the flagstone path to the door, he looked haggard and grey; when he embraced her, his cheek to hers, she realised it was because he had not been shaved. 'I have to talk to thee,' he said, 'come.' He led her to the small withdrawing-room, closed the door behind him and stayed there for a moment, listening for footsteps in the corridor. Then he said in a hushed voice, 'Thomas Fell's family is in trouble.'

'Ah?' It did not surprise her, after the way the woman had looked in church. 'Why?'

He told her about the boy's meeting with John Sawrey. 'I went to make the rounds of the neighbours this morning. As it turned out, they had already had visits from Sawrey and Lampitt, who had, so they said, reliable information that the man is on his way back to Ulverston to complete the subversion of the household of Justice Fell before his return from the Welsh Circuit. Lampitt's role in all this is clear, the man made him look like a fool. But Sawrey is not interested in Fox. He has his eye on Thomas Fell's place on the bench; now, obviously, he has the bee in his bonnet that he can achieve his end by discrediting Fell's wife. Under the guise of wanting to protect her, of course.'

'What do the neighbours say about all this?'

'They have no plan of action yet, but should Fox come back and disrupt another church service, he is going to be dealt with by them.'

'Thrown out?'

'Let us hope that is all they will do. Sawrey is using the word witchcraft in connection with Mistress Fell.'

'O douce Vierge . . . !'

She turned to the window and looked at the road through the lush green of the linden tree. In the distance the small red roofs of Ulverston looked a picture of security in the dell of the forbidding fells. But she knew how small, peaceful villages could explode into murderous insanity, as if they were inhabited not by honest simple folk but by an alien inhuman breed obsessed by lust for torture, rape, murder, obscene mutilation.

'What will Mistress Fell do now?'

'Thou art a woman. What wouldst thou do?'

There was a small black figure on the road now, trudging wearily in the heat, carrying a staff and a sack on his back. Nobody dangerous or alarming; but then, few of them were; most of them lived God-fearing lives, loving their families, going to church, until suddenly an evil demon within them was sparked into life and those same people would, in one nightmarish hour, change into . . . She must stop this. 'I think she will probably be quite forceful in her efforts to protect her saint,' she said. 'She may even come between them, should they start to manhandle him.'

'I'm afraid that's exactly what Sawrey wants her to do.'

'I don't believe that they would dare lay hands on her, though. Not the squires.'

He said carefully, 'I am not so sure. I had the feeling that the fanatic and the Fell woman's adulation of him are the symbol of something else now, something that has been rankling inside us all ever since the King was murdered. It's completely irrational. It was the Puritans who did that, yet it looks as if their rage will vent itself not on Lampitt and Sawrey, who are both Puritan creatures, but on the man who challenges them. As I listened to Rutledge, I went on asking myself: How is it possible that sane, civilized men . . .'

Suddenly she knew what she had to do. 'What if I went to warn her?'

He remained silent for so long that she turned to look at him and was struck by the expression on his face. He looked grey and drawn, his eyes full of old men's anguish. 'What if I dispatch my groom to warn Fox?' he suggested. 'We'll send word to the man to change his itinerary . . .'

'There is not the slightest chance of it,' she said. 'It would only whet his appetite; people like him thrive on persecution. No, I'll

go to see her, and after that, we leave. I don't wish to be around when all this comes to a head.'

He blurted out, 'Thou must not go to her!'

'Why not?'

'I cannot agree to anything that — that might hurt thee!'

She went to him, looked into his anguished eyes so full of tenderness and melancholy, kissed the tip of his nose and said, 'Thank thee, old friend.' She touched his stubbly cheek. 'Now thou hadst better be shaved. I'll call him.'

She rustled to the door and went to call for Bonbon and for her coach, feeling strong and confident and utterly secure.

The groom drove her to the Hall in the coach-and-pair, which was less conspicuous than the four-in-hand. She even left her maid behind, but she did take Froufrou on his tasselled pillow, in a symbolic gesture of protection.

On her arrival at the Hall she had expected to be ushered into the withdrawing chamber of the lady of the house, where they would have their intimate conversation, after which she would leave as unobtrusively as she had come. But she had forgotten about the seven children; the moment she arrived her coach was surrounded by breathless girls in white dresses. She stepped down daintily and was considerably shaken, as was Froufrou, when another girl dropped at her feet from a tree, losing a pair of spectacles as she sprawled in the gravel. The others helped in the search for them, which diverted their attention, but the son of the house came out, in full gentleman's regalia, to greet her effusively with bow, leg and hat. When he finally conducted her to his mother, she had the feeling of being observed from every window.

As she followed the boy across the cool, vaulted hall she heard to her dismay that the girls were following her. Despite the religious ecstasies in which they reportedly indulged, they seemed desperate for entertainment. The woman was in the garden, at the far end of a gravel path, on her knees, clipping roses. The wide pocket of her apron full of pink and red blooms made her look pregnant with flowers as she rose to greet her visitor. Her reception was distinctly chilly, she even seemed reluctant to ask her children to leave. When they had gone she asked, without inviting her to sit down, 'And what can I do for you, *Madame*?'

Henrietta frowned. Why this hostility? Ah, of course. Her

leaving the church in the middle of the man's harangue. 'First of all, I would like to assure you that we did not leave the church the other day as an expression of disapproval,' she said. 'I became indisposed and my husband had no choice but to take me home.'

The other eyed her without tenderness. 'If it is your intention to discuss the rumours that we all have lost our heads here,' she said stiffly, 'I am grateful for your kindness, but I cannot see why any of this should concern anyone outside my family.' It was as close to an invitation to leave as a civilised hostess could come.

'I'm afraid it's not quite as simple as that,' Henrietta said matter-of-factly. 'You are in danger of physical harm. I am not talking about your evangelical friend, but about enemies of your husband who are conspiring to destroy him through you.' She did not wait for the invitation, but sat down on a nearby bench, facing the roses.

The woman was obviously of two minds as to how to react to this bluntness; after a moment's hesitation she said, 'Would you be kind enough to talk in particulars rather than generalities?' With her apron full of roses and a lock of her hair loose, she looked strikingly handsome for her age — passionate and yet innocent, a combination irresistible to any unscrupulous male.

'Mr. Lampitt and Justice Sawrey are making the rounds of the manor houses of the neighbourhood, drumming up support to throw your friend out of church this coming Sunday.'

'Nonsense,' the woman said with impatience. 'Mr. Fox is away.'

'My dear,' Henrietta said, with the quiet authority of the older woman, 'let's stop snapping at each other and talk sense. There are, as you must be aware, certain people who would like nothing better than to embarrass and maybe even unseat your husband by discrediting you.'

'But how?' the other cried irritably. '*How* could they?'

'For one thing, the goings-on here at the Hall last night.'

'Which?!'

'Well, the — er — pentecostal extravaganza, maids and grooms dancing *á la Bacchante* . . .'

'Oh! For mercy's sake!' The woman sounded exasperated, but sat down beside her, the mass of roses on her lap. Their fragrance, heady and voluptuous, enveloped them. 'Surely nobody is hoping to unseat my husband because of my servants dancing round the Maypole?'

'What I am talking about, *Madame*, most urgently, is your friendship with this young man Fox. That is how they will try to get at you. You see, Mr. Fox gave quite a performance last Sunday, which you should try to see from the point of view of the squires of the neighbourhood. Not only did he bruise their pride by holding forth at them without their invitation; not only are his ideas radical and even subversive; above all, he is powerfully male. No woman, young or old, could remain entirely unresponsive. This is exactly —'

The woman bristled. 'Are you by any chance, *Madame*, including me?'

Her heart sank. The very violence of the reaction meant that she had touched a live nerve. '*Voyons*, Mistress Fell,' she said, smiling, 'you cannot tell me that you have remained unaware of his, how shall I say, professional virility as he stood there raising the roof, bringing every single woman to heel and ignoring the menfolk? To the squires, this man —'

But the woman was outraged. She sprang to her feet, spilling roses. 'That is enough!' she cried, eyes flashing, her anger formidable and preposterous among the flowers. 'I will not listen to another word! I fully respect each person's private affairs, wherever she comes from or whatever her reputation may be, but in this case I must insist that you do not judge me by your own standards!'

It was a slap in her face, but Henrietta gritted her teeth. It was obvious from the woman's indignation that, despite her seven children, she was still inexperienced. Her outrage was sincere, her innocence frighteningly real. 'Dear friend,' she said, stroking Froufrou, who had started to tremble, 'I do not wish to meddle in your affairs either. But I must make you understand the choice before you. Think for a moment of your children. I once had two children of my own, so I speak from experience . . .'

The woman, totally oblivious, gave her a look of utter contempt and said, 'I am sure you do, *Madame*. I am well aware of your reputation.'

She sat for a moment speechless, hurt beyond words at the very moment she had been about to make the supreme sacrifice of confiding in this miserable creature and thereby living through it all again. She rose and retorted, at her worst, 'In that case, *Madame*, let me be completely frank. There is nothing more exciting to a passionate woman than a true prophet, but let me tell you that as lovers they are terribly disappointing, certainly

not worth the price we are expected to pay for the privilege of bedding with St. Paul.'

Before the other had been able to close her mouth, she swept down the path, across the dark hall and out the door, to break down and sob in the privacy of her coach, with Froufrou on her lap greedily licking the salt of her tears as they dripped on to his little satin pillow.

'Oh, Jeannot, Christine ... Tonton, Titi, *mes chéries, mes petits choux* ...'

The coach lurched, knocking her wig sideways; a few straggly locks of grey hair fell across her forehead. But she was beyond shame and humiliation. She was, as she had been ever since that radiant morning twenty-four years before, a sorrowing mother going through the torments of hell.

* * *

The moment she saw Mistress Best vanish down the garden path, Margaret Fell felt ashamed of herself.

That very morning, despite the superstition that to see a spider before noon was a bad omen, she had placed a glass over one of the hairy beasts, slid the marker from her Bible underneath it and carried it outside; now, not an hour later, she had treated a fellow human being so cruelly that the woman had left sobbing. As she sat there with her apron full of roses, it seemed the worst thing she had done since George Fox had come into her life.

But how sordid! The woman was obviously incapable of understanding it; two weeks ago she herself would have been hard put to understand. Then George had still seemed to be an unstable dreamer, with his notion of God as 'an infinite ocean of light and love'. Now she knew exactly what he meant. She experienced it all day. She moved through the house on winged feet, flying up the stairs, singing as she sorted out the linen, smiling at spiders, kissing Mongol, being angelic with the children. George had nothing to do with this; she felt for him what she had felt for her dear father. A deep fondness, that was all. But it was a pity that Thomas might be disturbed on his return by rumours, distortions. Perhaps she should go to meet him; wait for him in the inn in Lancaster where he always stayed. But no, her place was here, especially now. Without her, her little flock might fall apart.

Worrisome as the situation had seemed for a moment, her

feeling of security soon returned. Even so, when she was about to drift off to sleep that night, she arrived at a decision. She would not go to church come Sunday, but leave George to God.

* * *

Both his followers and his enemies rejoiced when they saw George Fox loom in the shadows under the organ as it played the prelude to the opening hymn of the evening service. This time he was accompanied by more than a dozen disciples, townfolk converted by his first sermon, who had been waiting outside the church for his arrival.

The only representative of Swarthmoor Hall was George Fell, alone in the squire's pew. He had never before had it entirely to himself; it was an unnerving experience to face the curious glances of all those people alone. Never before had he seen the church so crowded; throngs of people stood pressed together on the tombstones behind the benches; when the hymn started, the massive sound of all those voices sent a shiver down his spine, for it was beautiful and grandiose. He had never felt so important, invested with such authority, for he sat there as the sole representative of the House of Swarthmoor, only son of Thomas Fell, Lord Chief Justice of the Duchy of Lancaster. If Fox were once again to interfere with a divine service ordained by his father, it would depend on him alone, in splendid isolation in the family pew, as to how the populace would react. It filled him with giddy pride and buttock-tightening apprehension; he no longer regretted having taken his mother at her word when she said that every member of the family was free to go to church if he wished. What a story to tell his father! How proud he would be of his son, representing him in such a dignified manner! He did not deign to look at Fox, he did not deign to look at anyone; he sat staring ahead of him in his blue velvet suit with starched ruff and cuffs, a miniature replica of his father on the bench.

When the singing ceased, a hush fell over the congregation. Even those women who had been staring at the young boy in the Swarthmoor pew now turned their heads and watched the dissenter in the shadows, waiting for him to speak. Fox let the silence deepen until there was no whisper, no shuffle, not the rustle of a prayerbook left; then he slowly came down the aisle towards the pulpit, where Priest Lampitt, pale and unhappy, stood waiting. But when he was about to speak, his way was barred by Justice Sawrey, who today had taken a seat on the aisle.

'Stop!' Sawrey cried. 'You will be allowed to speak only if you speak according to the Scriptures!' The words seemed to convey a permission, but the tone in which they were spoken belied it. Obviously, the squires had charged the judge with using that formula before anything was done to silence the man.

Fox looked down upon Sawrey with a rueful expression, as if he were commiserating with him in this degrading situation; then he said, 'Of course I will, friend John. As thou wilt remember, that is my point.'

The judge went scarlet with rage; he said, through clenched teeth, 'At least take your hat off in church, you blasphemer!'

Fox's tone was conciliatory when he answered, 'I am sorry, friend John. I only take off my hat when I speak to the Almighty God in prayer.'

For some reason this reply, peaceable as it was, enraged the judge beyond endurance. 'Stop him! he cried, his voice now shrill with fury. 'Throw him out! Show him what kind of men live here in Ulverston!'

For a moment nobody moved. Had Fox insulted the priest, they would have sprung at him without a qualm; all he had done was to insult an individual who did not himself quite belong. For a moment it seemed as if Fox would win the day; then Mistress Best's little dog suddenly began to yap hysterically, and a voice yelled, 'Come on, men! Let's show His Honour who we are!' It was John McHair the poacher; his self-interest was so blatant that only the ruffians in the congregation rose in response. They threw themselves upon Fox with raucous shouts and a rumbling of boots, and began beating him with their fists. Somebody cried, 'Stop that! Not in church!' But it was as if with the first blows the pent-up rage of the men in the congregation had been unleashed after all, against their better judgment. It was no longer only the ruffians who were beating and kicking Fox, almost every man in the church seemed to have joined them.

Young George saw Colonel Best give a note to his groom, who took it to Justice Sawrey. The judge, who had been egging on the assailants, read the note and started to shout, 'Not in church! Not in church! Take him outside!' It took some doing, but he managed to fight his way into the mob until he reached John McHair, to whom he shouted something; it resulted in the poacher dragging Fox through the mob to the door of the church, where the constable and his henchmen stood waiting, ready to grab him. As they started to beat on him with their staves, Judge

Sawrey shouted, 'Throw him out of the town! See to it that he never sets foot here again!'

'Don't worry, Your Honour!' John McHair yelled. 'I'll break the bugger's back meself, with this!' He showed the gnarled stick he always carried whenever George spied him hanging around Sawrey's park at dusk.

'Good man!' the judge cried. 'The God of our fathers is with you!'

It seemed an inappropriate remark for a man who, as everyone knew, was only a fisherman's son: but George Fell, spellbound in the family pew, felt a wild, unbridled response. Suddenly he rose to join them.

* * *

Boniface Baker had been waiting outside the church, as it had been too crowded for him to get in. He had heard the commotion inside with growing alarm; then, to his incredulous horror, he saw John McHair the poacher drag George Fox out the door and throw him down the steps, where the constable's men started to whack his cringing body with their rods so cruelly that Bonny heard himself shriek, 'No, no! Stop that! Stop!' and rushed to his friend's aid.

He tried to stop the constable by grabbing his arm, but he was thrust aside, squawking, without the man even noticing him. Then a mob came pouring out of the church: people he knew well, who suddenly seemed transformed into something terrifyingly different, animals, shrieking, with wide staring eyes. They all threw themselves upon the prostrate body of that wonderful, kind man, his friend; he forgot how small he was, how weak; he began to fight his way through the flailing fists and the kicking boots towards his friend while the raving mob shrieked all around him.

He was unable to reach him. He stumbled, fell, was kicked, shoved; it was as if he had fallen in the midst of a herd of stampeding cattle. Nobody noticed him; those who caught a fleeting glimpse of him thought that he was trying to add his own feeble kicks. He was trampled upon, but something drove him on, stronger than pain and fear; he *must* get to him, he *must*, he had to shield that poor battered body from those blows, those boots that went on kicking, kicking, as the surging mass of men slowly dragged George Fox towards the open fells.

He had just about given up hope of getting to his friend when

he heard the high, terrified whinny of a pony, the shriek of a boy. The mob faltered; in that moment he managed, agile as a ferret, to worm his way towards George Fox and grab his leg. Then, with a shriek of fury, the kicks and blows started all over again; this time he was part of the body they were battering.

* * *

George Fell ran to his pony tethered to the railing outside. In the distance, towards the fells, he saw the mob, arms flailing, their shouts a fierce, bestial roar that was terrifying and yet irresistible. He leaped into the saddle, dug his spurs into Faggot's flanks and raced after them, the pony's little hoofs clattering on the cobbles.

He overtook them at the edge of the town, where they all seemed to be piled on top of one another on the narrow bridge across the sewer ditch. As he approached and reined in his pony, he discovered that they were no longer beating up Fox alone; they had begun to fight among themselves. People who had come to church to hear him and who were trying to stop the violence were being knocked down; several had had their heads broken and blood was running down their faces. Their screams as they were thrown into the ditch were so chilling that he dug his spurs into Faggot's flanks again and lashed the pony with his whip.

But he heard someone cry, 'There he is! The witch's son! Get him, get him!' They threw themselves upon him, shrieking; for a moment it seemed as if Faggot would escape them, then the sharp little hoofs slithered on the cobbles. Whinnying with a human sound of agony, the pony crashed to the ground.

He screamed in terror, 'Mother! Mother! Help, Mother!' He was grabbed by cruel, hurting hands, lifted above the heads shouting hatred and derision, and hurled into the ditch. There he lay in the stinking sludge, gasping, choking, feeling the cold slime seep through his clothes and drag him down until only his head, open-mouthed, with terror-stricken eyes, remained above the surface, floating disembodied on the white ruff, while all around him moaning people were wallowing in the sludge, choking in the pestilential stench of the excretions of Ulverston, his father's town.

* * *

After they had dragged him across the bridge, the mob fell upon George Fox anew with stakes and clubs and continued to beat

him until he fell to the ground, dazed and broken. Yet, even as he was bludgeoned and dragged along, there was within him a mounting exultation that grew until he knew: He is here, I am in His love.

At that moment the power of the Lord sprang through him. He stood up, stretched out his arms and cried in a loud, joyous voice, 'Strike again, beloved friends! Here are my arms! Here is my other cheek!'

His tormentors backed away for a moment in bewilderment. Pain and fear had dropped away from him like a cloak; only a heavy weight attached to his leg still tried to drag him down. Then the huge bearded man who had grabbed him in the church cried, 'Strike again, Quaker? Hast had none but soft blows until now? Faith, then: I'll strike thee in earnest this time!' He bore down on his outstretched hand with a staff so cruelly that pain shot, white hot, through his arm into his chest, knocking his breath away. He staggered under the blow: all that was mortal in him cried out in agony; then the power of the Lord sprang through his arm, his hand, and all pain ceased. Christ, that battered, bruised Man of sorrows who had stumbled and cried out on the road to Golgotha, rose within him in utter tenderness. He held out his hand, closed it, opened it again; then he slowly raised his arms in a gesture of blessing and said, 'May the peace and the love of the living God be with you all, Amen.' As he spoke, the weight on his leg finally dropped away.

He looked about him at the multitude, so full of love for them that tears blurred his eyes. A soldier made his way towards him, sword drawn, and said, 'I will protect you, sir, for you are a man!'

But he said, 'Sheath thy sword, friend, throw it from thee and live in the spirit that removes the occasion for all wars.'

Then he walked back into the town; the crowd around him grew as he went. He climbed the pump in the market place, and, from there, gave the most powerful sermon of his life.

* * *

When Bonny Baker woke up he did not know where he was. All around him people were moaning and crying, 'Help ... help! Please, somebody! Help, please ...' He was overcome by fear and wanted to flee, but the moment he moved he shrieked with pain and fell back, panting. But he had saved him, he had saved his friend! The memory of that triumph was for a moment stronger

than the pain that held him pinned down. He managed to raise himself on one elbow, saw all around him people lying in the dust, some stirring, some moaning. He could not see what was going on across the bridge, but he heard voices, horses; then a filthy body came crawling out of the sewer ditch and stumbled in his direction. He recognised Master George Fell, covered with slime, bleeding from a cut on his face, lurching drunkenly as if sleepwalking.

'Master George . . . help . . . help!' His voice was too feeble; pain shot through his body again and he fell back, fainting.

As he regained consciousness, people were standing around him. Someone bent down, touched his shoulder and called, 'Bonny? Bonny, boy? Art thou hurt?' It was Mr. Woodhouse; he burst into tears. 'Hush, easy, me boy,' Mr. Woodhouse said. He felt hands grope under his body, trying to lift him. The pain was so excruciating that he gave a wild scream of anguish.

'It's his thigh,' he heard Mr. Woodhouse say, with echoes, as if he were lying at the bottom of a well. 'Easy, I think it's broken.' The hands tightened their grip on his tortured body; as they began to lift him, he opened his eyes wide, saw the face of Mr. Woodhouse in the sky and cried, 'I did a miracle! Mr. Woodhouse, I did a miracle!'

Mr. Woodhouse looked down on him in a way he had never looked before, and said, 'I know, laddie, I know. Now let me take thee home.'

Pain overwhelmed him; he spiralled back into oblivion.

* * *

The first intimation of what had happened came to Margaret Fell when Will Hartford, the head groom, rushed in to tell her that Master George's pony had just come home alone, so shy and nervous that he feared the little animal must have had a terrible fright. He suggested that he go out on the fells to look for Master George, as he must have been thrown; maybe the pony had been attacked by a ram, the mating season for the sheep having started.

She knew at once that it had not been a ram. She ordered Will Hartford to prepare the two-in-hand and called to Ann Traylor to get their cloaks and accompany her. She was about to step into the coach when Will Hartford cried, 'Madam, look!' She saw her son stagger into the courtyard, filthy, covered with mud, whimpering her name.

She rushed towards him, knelt in front of him, pressed his shivering, stinking body against her; the stench from his clothes and his hair was horrible. He trembled uncontrollably; his breath came in heaving gasps; all she could do was lead him indoors, dirty as he was, kissing his grimy face, whispering, 'Sweeting, sweeting, don't cry, I'm here, I'm here, don't worry, thou art home, thou are safe now . . .'

She bathed him and put him to bed herself. Before he finally fell asleep, all he said was, 'They hurt me. They hurt me terribly . . .'

Her first impulse was to flee with her family. The town had obviously taken leave of its senses; after assaulting a defenceless child, God only knew what they might do. She should pack her family into the travelling coach and go to her aunt in Great Urswick, or, better still, to Judge Cartwright in Gleaston, her husband's mentor. Certainly he would be better equipped to protect them than Aunt Clara, who had nothing with which to shield them from a rabid mob but a doddering gardener and a foul-mouthed cockatoo.

But what about George Fox? If this was what they had done to a child, what had they done to him? If she had not been so selfish, thinking only of her own security, she would have been in church this morning; she could have prevented the whole thing by the sheer weight of her authority.

For a moment she thought of leaving everybody in the Hall to fend for themselves while she went to look for George; then there was a knock at the door and Thomas Woodhouse came in to ask if he might take Will Hartford and Harry Martin along to look for the servants who had not returned: Henderson, little Mabby and Bonny Baker. She gave them leave to go; as Thomas went to the door, she added, 'Please look for George Fox.' Then, as an afterthought, 'bring along any others who may be in need of help and shelter.' Thomas said, 'Very well, Madam,' and left; neither of them realised that they had returned to their old relationship.

She was totally unprepared for what followed. When, an hour later, the first of the injured were brought in, she was stunned by the magnitude of the disaster. Among them was Bonny Baker, unconscious, horribly bruised, moaning as the men put him down on the settee in the hall. She was told he had a broken thigh and instantly sent Harry Martin for the apothecary. It was

fortunate she did so; Bonny Baker was only the first of many, all of them bleeding, beaten, terrified out of their wits; all of them begging her to protect them, to save them from the fury of the hellions in town.

It was her worst moment; she was dumbfounded, incredulous and very much afraid. Then the mounting chaos of all those wounded people, crazed with fear or limp with shock, forced her to face reality.

The old Margaret, mistress of Swarthmoor Hall, took over from muddle-headed Maggie and her wild-eyed fancies. She began, with calm determination, to turn the house into an infirmary, ordered mattresses to be brought down from all the beds in the house, bed linen torn up for bandages, hot water, towels, camomile tea, wine; she ransacked the household to succour the victims of her folly, or spiritual awakening, or whatever it had been. But whatever it turned out to have been in the end, she knew that her world would never be the same again, and that for the House of Swarthmoor the years of the locust had started.

* * *

When Henrietta Best stood on the threshold of the Hall and stared at the scene with horrified eyes, she almost turned and fled. Everywhere, among the furniture, along the walls, in front of the hearth, on the landing of the second floor, injured people lay on mattresses, settees, rows of pillows, pads of folded blankets. Among them moved the servants of the Hall, washing their wounds, bandaging them, supporting them as they sipped from china cups and pewter goblets. It was all so reminiscent of La Couvertoirade after the Cardinal's troops had made their first assault on the town, that she was overcome by the urge to run back to the coach; then she heard a child's voice calling, 'Mama!'

A little girl, no more than five years old, stumbled towards her mother with a pitcher of water almost too heavy for her. The sight gave her back the notion which had moved her to come; that there was a chance, at last, to give a posthumous sense to the calvary of her own children. She had to grasp it quickly, before the flesh became weak; she hurried past the beds, ignored the hands stretched out to her in supplication, and found Mistress Fell bent over a small boy who was being examined by the apothecary. Despite her protests, she managed to steer her into an

empty little room, off the hall. There, in the semi-darkness, she confronted the woman with what lay in wait for her if she did not come to her senses, now! She told her about the saint she had married because of his spiritual passion; how they had been forced to flee from persecution, leaving all their worldly goods behind; how they had gone into hiding, five hundred Huguenots in the little town of La Couvertoirade, in an effort to escape from the mercenaries of Cardinal Richelieu; how, after a siege of five nightmarish weeks, the enraged soldiers had finally breached the walls and massacred every single man, raped every woman, and as for her children . . .

She could not say it. She covered her face with her hands, tried to force herself to speak, but she could not. She felt the arm of the woman around her shoulders, calm, self-assured, and she was about to shriek in anguish when she felt that someone else had entered the room. The arm around her shoulders was taken away; she knew who it was before she heard the woman cry, 'George!'

She looked up. Fox stood in the doorway, mud-streaked, his clothes in tatters; a power and a light shone about him that were irresistible to any woman, old or young, married or widowed, virgin or harlot. It mattered not what he called himself, Paul, Savonarola, Calvin, Rohan, he was always the same and always would be; he was the monster that had devoured her children.

'Art thou hurt?' the woman asked, the voice of all the women who had ever loved a saint and suffered for the rest of their lives.

'I was,' he answered, 'but the power of the Lord was over me, and my wounds were healed by a miracle. So I guided my enemies back to the market place and the power of God thundered among them.'

'A miracle?'

Henrietta cried out, 'Yes! He performs miracles! He heals the sick, he raises the dead, he cures broken limbs, drives out madness! But to what purpose? What good does it do? I can tell you what it will do! I have known him, I married him, I bore his children! Do you know what will happen to your children if you don't cut yourself loose from this monster now, *now*, while there is still time?' The woman tried to hush her; she knew that she was losing control, but she cried, 'They will break down the walls, they will tear your children from your arms, they will grab them by their ankles, and while they shriek your name they will

smash their heads against the wall! And while you scream their life away, you will be raped, in the blood from their skulls, the pulp of their brains!'

For a motionless moment she hovered on the brink of a precipice of unspeakable horror, death itself. Then Fox opened his arms and said, 'Friend . . .' He said it with such tenderness and infinite understanding that she broke down. His strong, sheltering arms guided her to a chair, where she collapsed in defeat and disgust. She had fallen for that irresistible siren's voice again, for the chilling, impersonal love of the saint.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up. Margaret Fell stood in front of her, holding out a bandage. She gazed at the woman, aghast, for she was asking her to take up her life again where it had been twenty-four years before. Then she heard her name. There stood her husband, in the doorway. Stretching out her arms towards him, she cried, '*Chéri, chéri!* Take me away, take me away! *Je te supplie!*'

He led her away, gently, from what she knew had been her moment of truth.

* * *

The sight of the wounded had sobered George Fox; the outburst of the deranged woman deeply distressed him. He went back into the hall and bent over the stableboy with his chalk white face, his leg crudely bandaged with two croquet mallets for splints. He heard him say, 'George, I saved thee, George, didn't I, George, I saved thee?' He put his hand on the boy's brow in a gesture of tenderness, overwhelmed by doubt.

An hour ago he had known ecstasy as the power of the Lord healed his hand and enabled him to deliver his message of hope and love to his tormentors. Now looking down upon the child who had tried to protect him from the mob, he knew a moment of total despair. Again he heard the voice of that woman, saw the images it had evoked.

'The apothecary says he cannot cure me,' the boy said, 'but he can't do miracles like thee, George, can he?'

At the sight of that face, radiant with confidence and adoration, he stretched out his hand towards the child and beseeched the infinite ocean of light and love to bestow upon him the blessing of being whole again, without pain and fear, to restore his broken limb. But even as he prayed he sensed that his plea would go unanswered. The power of the Lord had been withdrawn

from him. He was torn with pity for the child who saw his simple trust abused. 'My God,' he prayed, 'why hast Thou forsaken me?' He opened his eyes. 'Friend Bonny, the Lord says: Not yet.'

The child looked at him, perplexed.

'Don't ask me why. God speaks through me only at times. All I can give thee at this moment is my gratitude for what thou hast done, and my pride at being thy friend.'

The joy and expectation on the boy's face, furrowed with pain, slowly dimmed. Then he whispered, 'Yes, George.'

He could stand it no longer. He turned away to go outside, but a hand on his arm held him back. It was Margaret Fell; he had not realised she was standing beside him. 'George? Art thou all right?'

'Yes,' he said. He walked away, past the litters, out into the night.

A pale half moon seemed to move breathlessly through racing clouds. He stood in the darkness, praying, when a voice called him softly.

'Quaker?'

He looked around, but saw no one. The voice had seemed to come from overhead, but above him there was nothing but the moon, the scudding clouds.

'Quaker? Come over here.'

Now the voice seemed to come from the dark orchard.

'Where art thou?'

'Here.' The dark shape of a man stepped out of the shadows of the orchard into the light of the moon. It was the man who had struck him. 'Show me thy hand, Quaker,' he said quietly.

He lifted his arm. The man took his hand and squeezed it, hard. There was no response; the man seemed to stand dumbfounded; then he said, 'Show me the other.'

He obeyed. The man squeezed that hand too; it was as sound as the other. Then he said calmly, 'Hold out the other again.'

'Why?'

'I am going to break it.'

He had often been threatened with violence; that of God within him had always rallied in response. Now there seemed to be nothing within him, only a dark, despairing void. He saw the man lift his staff for the blow and cried, 'Not again! This time thou wouldst break it!'

'Why? Because there are not enough people around? Thou wilt not perform a miracle for just me?'

'It was not I who performed the miracle, it was God! And His power has left me.'

'Never mind thy fancy talk,' the man said, lifting his stick. 'Give me thy hand.'

'I told thee, thou wilt break it this time!' But he lifted his hand.

The man lowered his stick. 'Thou really wouldst have me strike thee again?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'That may be the way in which God wishes to punish me.'

'For what?'

'For the suffering I have caused.'

'Suffering?'

'All those people in there. That poor child with the broken leg.'

'Art thou mad?' the man cried angrily. 'That was not thy doing! I struck them! I struck *thee*! What is thy game?'

'It is no game! God brought me here; I unleashed all this violence in the belief that I was in His power. Now He has drawn away from me, I see only suffering, destruction. I came out here to wrestle with the angel, like . . .' He fell silent. Perhaps this was the angel. It was as if, in the darkness, something had changed. Jacob! The angel had touched him, and he had limped for the rest of his life.

He lifted his hand once more, this time with eagerness. 'Strike it!' he cried. 'Break it! Bestow upon me the mark of Jacob, in the name of the Lord!'

For a moment the man stood speechless; then he said vehemently, 'No, Quaker! Go and find thyself another angel!' He threw his stick away; it rustled briefly in the branches of a tree. 'The devil take thy tricks!' he cried. 'I wish I'd never set eyes on thee! Let Justice Sawrey do his own dirty work from now on!' Suddenly he pleaded, 'I believe thee. I believe in thy miracle, I won't doubt again; now let me go!'

'But thou must understand,' he urged, with great joy, 'it was not *my* miracle, it was God's! I am nothing! We all are vessels for His love, tools for His power. If it pleases Him to draw away from me, I can do nothing! I tried, but I could not even help a child with a broken thighbone!'

'Which child?'
'A stableboy.'
'Is he in there?'
'Yes . . .'
'Take me to him.'
'Thou?'
'I have set bones before. I had a dog once that broke his thigh in a trap. I set the bone; we walked the woods together for years.'

For a moment he hesitated, then he said, 'Very well. I'll take thee to him.' They went back into the house together.

So it came about that John McHair the poacher set Bonny Baker's broken thigh. He stayed on to help the women carry pitchers of water and kettles of soup from the kitchen; when, later that night, all those present gathered in meeting for worship, he was among them.

During the silence George Fox thought about Jacob. The angel had touched the hollow on his thigh; he had limped for the rest of his life. Then it came to him what had really happened: the sign of Jacob had been bestowed not upon him, but upon a stableboy, and as a result a wolf had entered the Peaceable Kingdom.

He looked at the poacher, across from him. There he sat, his eyes bemused in his hirsute face. *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion together, and a little child shall lead them.*

Suddenly, there it was again: the indefinable, unmistakable presence of God.

CHAPTER THREE

THE virgin stretch of silver beach, bared by the tide, lay shimmering in the sun; the three horsemen who had appeared on the crest of the bluffs paused for a moment before starting their descent. Obviously, they were a master and his two underlings, there could be no mistaking the authoritative aloofness of the man in the centre, on the white Arab mare. He was the slightest of the three; his travelling clothes, covered with dust, were not

conspicuously different from those of the others, but his elaborate wig distinguished him as a gentleman. Feeling the cool breeze from the estuary, he removed the wig and tossed it to the man on his right, who caught it deftly. He suddenly looked old, with his short-cropped grey hair, a Roman general surveying the sands before crossing them.

He sat for a moment, eyes closed, with a blissful expression on his face, savouring the freshness of the sea breeze after their long, dusty ride; his nervous, hot horse stirred below him with a tinkling of chains and a creaking of leather. 'Ah,' he said. 'It's good to be home!' Then, as if catching himself in a moment of untoward emotion, he opened his eyes, his face took on its disdainful expression again and he said, 'All right, let's proceed. The tide is favourable.'

As the horsemen began to descend the steep slope of the fell, a bird flew screeching from the bracken; the grit kicked up by the horses' hoofs rustled among the leaves. The wind that had blown fresh and clean on the top of the bluff subsided; the miasmic scent of primaeval creation enveloped them, the stench of myriad sea creatures dying, of algae rotting in the sun, turning into fertile soil for future generations. Often, as a young man, had Thomas Fell galloped across these sands with his heart in his mouth, in a mad race with the onrushing tide, wondering if this time he had left it too late, chilled by the sudden terror of an untimely, stupid end to his promising career. It had taken him years before he had begun to enjoy the sands, to savour their timeless beauty. So it was with some irritation that he heard the creaking of a saddle approach from behind. If only Sam Pruitt, with his petulant babble, would leave him alone! 'Yes, what is it?' he snapped.

But it was not Sam Pruitt, it was Charles, his groom, who had been riding a respectful distance behind him but who at the sight of the small band of horsemen approaching from the other shore drew ahead to protect his master. It was a symbolic gesture, but he executed it with pride and solemnity. He rode towards the riders in the distance, a small concentration of multi-legged life cantering in thin air like a mirage, gossamer cloaks flying.

'Is that Priest Lampitt, Your Lordship?' a voice asked on his other side. This time it was Sam Pruitt.

'I could not say.'

'They seem to be in a hurry, don't they?'

He did not reply, it would only encourage the man.

'I wonder whether they are coming to meet us?' Sam always talked about 'us', like a midwife.

'Why not ride ahead and find out?'

The clerk hesitated; then he spurred his horse. As he overtook Charles Cotten, the latter turned in his saddle, looking hurt; Thomas Fell gave him a wave of the hand to reassure him that no offence was meant. Ah! What a bore servants were! He watched the small figure of his clerk join the distant horsemen. They all milled together for a moment, then Sam came cantering back, ahead of the others. They were now close enough for him to recognise some faces: Priest Lampitt, John Sawrey, Rutledge. Indeed, it looked like a delegation; he called to Charles for his wig and put it back on. The panting horse of his clerk drew up beside him.

'Your Lordship!' Sam Pruitt cried. 'Something has happened at the Hall! Something concerning your family! It seems that your wife, your household . . .' His voice was drowned out by the rumble of hoofs as the others joined them.

As always, at the hint of any calamity, Thomas Fell froze. At the first agonized outcry of his sensibilities, a drawbridge was pulled up between him and reality, achieving an instant inaccessibility that enabled him to meet castrophe with equanimity. As they drew up around him, he welcomed the flustered squires on their foam-splattered horse with aloofness. Lampitt, doffing his hat respectfully, cried, 'Your Lordship! We have grave news concerning your family! Her Ladyship, your daughters, even your servants have succumbed to witchcraft!'

Despite his detachment, Thomas Fell was relieved. At least no one was dead.

'I'm afraid the good priest is right,' a high, pedantic voice continued. It was John Sawrey. 'During your absence Mistress Fell gave hospitality to a vagrant called George Fox, who proceeded to bring herself and your entire household under his spell. Not only did the man interrupt a church service with profanities in which he was, I am grieved to say, supported by your good wife; the day before yesterday he turned up in church again and this time caused a riot which resulted in injuries and broken limbs among the population. I am sorry to have to report that Mistress Fell has seen fit to give the man sanctuary; he resides as of this moment at your house. We look upon you as the highest authority in the county, and also presumably in your household, to put matters right without delay.'

The word 'presumably' filled Thomas Fell with fury. Until that moment he had been confused and worried, despite his detachment; now he recovered his wits with a vengeance. God's fish! How dare he, the bloody little upstart! 'Am I to conclude that you gentlemen have turned up in such numbers to tell me how to run my household?' he asked, knowing it was unwise, but Sawrey's insult had stung him to the quick.

'No, Thomas Fell!' a deep voice grumbled close by. 'Of course not!' It was Rutledge, his closest neighbour, a man with a heart of gold but the brains of one of his mastiffs. 'We just thought we would warn you about the situation before you reached home, so you would be fully prepared.'

'I see. Thank you. Now,' he continued, turning to the priest, 'would you be so kind as to justify the word "witchcraft".'

'Well, Your Lordship, the actions and attitudes of your good wife . . .'

'Do you realise, sir, that a charge of witchcraft is a serious matter? Are you going to stand by it or was it spoken in the heat of excitement?' Without waiting for a reply, he turned to Sawrey. 'I take it that you support the accusation?'

Sawrey, though his face showed no sign of it, realised the implications of that question. Despite his ludicrous struggle for high life, he was an astute lawyer, as quick-witted as they came. 'I apologise in behalf of Priest Lampitt for that unfortunate word,' he said. 'It was indeeed spoken in haste.' He turned to the priest. 'I am sure Mr. Lampitt will be eager to apologise; he obviously does not realise the implications.' He said it affably enough, but there could be no doubting the urgency of his tone.

Lampitt responded at once. 'Forgive me, Your Lordship,' he said, doffing his unsavory black hat again. 'I apologise. Indeed, I spoke in haste, in — in my eagerness to impress upon you the seriousness of the situation.'

'Exactly how serious is it? Did anybody die?'

'No, Your Lordship.'

'Any damage to property? Any cattle killed?'

'No.'

'I'm afraid it's more serious than that,' Sawrey's cool voice interceded, obviously aware that his distinguished colleague was demolishing the witness. 'No doubt at the instigation of the blasphemer, your good wife has ordained that there shall be no distinction in rank or intimacy between her family and the servants. Every night there is a heathenish gathering of a highly

emotional nature, during which the servants are encouraged to hold forth at their fancy; a few nights ago scenes of shocking lechery took place in the courtyard.'

'What would constitute shocking lechery, Mr. Sawrey?'

'Members of your staff danced naked in the moonlight and ended on the ground in communal fornication.'

'How do you know this? Were you there?'

'I have the eyewitness reports of impeccable witnesses.'

'Members of my household?'

'Indeed.'

'Who presumably are also under the spell of this satanic gentleman, whatever his name is?'

'Decidedly not. They are among the few who resisted the blandishments of the blasphemer. Their testimony is above suspicion.'

'Whose suspicion? Your own?'

The little man eyed him coldly. 'Indeed, sir.'

'In that case, I demand that you present me with a warrant, duly sworn, against Margaret Fell, spouse of Thomas Fell of Swarthmoor Hall.'

'Warrant?' the face of the damned pipsqueak began to show some emotion at last.

'I will then instantly swear out a complaint of slander against yourself and anybody else here who feels that what happens in the courtyard of my house at dead of night concerns him sufficiently to put my family in prison.' It was, of course, theatrical bluff; but Sawrey was the only one among them to realise it.

'Come, come, Fell, that's not what we intended,' Simon Rutledge protested in his mastiff's bark.

Then Rutherford piped up, 'Look, dear friend,' he said in his gentleman farmer's voice, 'the whole business has been blown out of proportion. What we are worried about is the sudden footing of equality on which your servants and your family seem to be. It has begun to infect our own households. Damn it all, this morning my wife told me that our kitchen wench had tried to call her "thou", and when I went to berate her she started to rant about this man Fox. He is just one of those rabble-rousers we have seen off and on since the revolution, but it is your good wife's support that makes him a threat to the community. That is why we're here. He *did* cause a riot in which people were injured and the innocent suffered. So, don't let's bandy about any big words like witchcraft, let's settle this as neighbours, among ourselves. That

is all. Is it not, gentlemen?' He looked about him. The others muttered in agreement; their relief was obvious. That left Sawrey and the miserable Lampitt.

'Thank you. As we proceed, will someone be so kind as to acquaint me with the facts, now that we have all vented our emotions?'

'Maybe I, as their shepherd, am best qualified to do so,' Lampitt said unctuously, eager to undo the damage.

'No, thank you, sir,' he said. 'I do not want to hear any more about blasphemy. I want to hear the facts about the rebellion in our households. Thank you.' With that, he turned to Rutherford, 'Tell me more about your good wife's problems,' he said with cold relish.

They started forward across the sands to Ulverston.

* * *

While the sober-minded Rutherford gave his account of the happenings at the Hall, William Best watched Fell with relief. The man really knew how to rise to the challenge. But how was he going to handle the wider situation? What could be done to defuse the bomb that threatened to destroy their community? How could that devil Fox be spirited away before he had a chance to do more mischief? How could that impetuous woman be induced to take up life again as if nothing had happened?

He did not get a chance for a word with Fell until after Rutledge and Rutherford had branched off. The moment they were gone, he drew up alongside his colleague and asked, 'Did my groom manage to find you yesterday?'

'Ah, Best. No, I haven't seen him.'

'I don't understand it — I sent him to meet you yesterday morning with a message warning you about this. I need not tell you that I find the whole affair extremely painful. Whatever happens, I am at your disposal.'

'Thank you.'

From the way the dark eyes sized him up, he knew that, to Fell, his solicitude was suspect. There was nothing he could do about it, at least for the present.

He rode home alone, deep in thought, and found, to his relief, that his wife had recovered sufficiently to welcome him. She looked happy and relaxed; it was a miracle how she had managed to rally. He was overcome by admiration.

They went to her little withdrawing-room, where he poured

out two glasses of muscatel. Maybe it was the relief he felt at her recovery, but as he told her what had happened the whole thing seemed to be reduced to its right proportions. A storm in a teacup.

'Poor Mistress Fell,' he said. 'Sawrey told him about those servants cavorting in the courtyard without a stitch on. God knows where he got hold of it; it must be all over town now. He even added a detail the boy did not mention: it seems the whole thing ended in communal fornication. H'm.' He took a sip of his wine.

'For a man in his situation, there is only one way of handling it,' she said thoughtfully.

'What would that be?'

'Get her with child.'

'What an extraordinary thing to say.'

She smiled. 'To understand that, *chéri*, thou wouldst have to be a woman.'

'Well,' he bantered, 'that, I'm afraid, is one thing I cannot do for thee.'

She laughed. 'Thank God for that.' In the silence that followed, there was a knock on the door.

'Come in!'

It was Kathryn, the maid. It would be only a cold supper this evening, she announced. Bonbon had taken to bed with a migraine.

It was most inconsiderate of him, but they met the emergency with determination. There is nothing more effective for removing the remains of a crisis than the emergence of a new one.

* * *

The moment she heard that her husband was climbing the bluff, Margaret Fell rushed upstairs to the window of their bedchamber. It had become a tradition over the years: each time he came home from the circuit she would stand there and watch him, and on his way to the house he would look up and wave; that would be their first contact.

She was so sure of the rightness of what she had done that she did not doubt he would understand, even though, she had been told, some of the neighbours had gone to meet him, obviously to make trouble.

There was a clatter of hoofs and suddenly he was there, looking tired and travel-stained. She watched as he dismounted and

Harry Martin the stableboy came running to take the horse and welcome his master. But the boy did not doff his hat; Thomas, with an angry blow, knocked it off his head.

It was so unlike him that she suddenly felt afraid. She closed her eyes and prayed for strength, for divine assistance; when she opened them again she saw Thomas stride across the drive without looking up at the window and vanish from sight. He had never done this before; she waited, with nervous twinges in her stomach, for his steps to come down the passage. But they did not come. She was prepared for his anger; not for his not coming at all. Was he talking to someone? She had to know. She gathered her skirts, went to the landing and peered down into the hall. He was not there.

She started down the stairs; then, through the window on the halfway landing she saw him: in the garden, sitting on the bench where she and George had sat. He must be so furious that he did not trust himself to face her.

Well, that was ridiculous! She started down the stairs to go to him, explain . . . Then she faltered and stopped. Perhaps someone else should speak to him first. But who? Only George had the power to confront him in one of those moods; but George had left early that morning and would not be back until nightfall. Whom else could she send, capable of braving the awesome fury in which he sat there, waiting for his first victim? Yet he looked terribly lonely, sitting there, terribly hurt. What a homecoming, poor man! Maybe someone should go there and love him, just love him. She could not do it; one of the children? Who? Mary was the only one who had never been intimidated by him, and he had never failed to respond to her. The little wretch! She might be only five, but she had the wiles of a woman.

She went to the playroom and found the children huddled there around Ann Traylor, the way they did when there was a bad thunderstorm. All seemed subdued except Mary, who sat alone in a corner, tearing a sheet of paper into little pieces, which she stuffed into the pocket of her pinafore.

'What on earth art thou doing?'

The child looked up. Her large blue eyes were remote. 'I am making something.'

She wanted to tell her to take that mess out of her pocket before going to see her father, but decided to let it pass. 'Father is in the garden, on the bench by the roses. I think he is waiting for thee.'

The little girl said calmly, 'I will go when I have finished my prize.' It was her private word for 'Surprise'.

She went on tearing up paper until Margaret was about to scream. Only when the whole sheet was gone did she spring to her feet and skip out of the room.

* * *

Thomas Fell had fled into the garden because he did not trust himself. He detested conjugal scenes; to have confronted his wife at that moment would have resulted in a flaming quarrel. The times she had plunged headlong into some sudden passionate concern, setting the whole household by its ears! When they still lived in London, here had been a soup kitchen for the poor, a school for orphans, a whole slough of harebrained enterprises; after their return to Swarthmoor she had press-ganged the villagers into a choir that sounded like feeding time in the Colosseum, and when the Puritan revolution had pronounced choirs to be relics of Popish idolatry she had changed it blithely into a 'madrigal society'. Oh! The commotion, the heartburn she had caused, over and over again, with her insufferable wilfulness! The cleaning up of the graveyard and the church, every able soul scrubbing tombstones; and those gargantuan Christmas parties for the villagers, turning the Hall into a madhouse of milling humanity munching Christmas pudding and rubbing hard sauce into his ancestral chairs! His father, God rest his soul, a notorious wencher in his day, had cried when he heard that his son was planning to marry Margaret, eighteen years his junior, so pure, so shy, so delicate, 'Delicate?! I may not know the gal too well, but I can tell thee this much: marry her, and she'll keep thee running out of breath for the rest of thy life! Delicate? God strike me vitals! A battering ram in petticoats!'

At the time, he had listened to the old man's tirade with condescension, but how the words had rung in his ears later! Now, damn it, she had done it again. Here he was, after three gruelling months on the circuit, looking forward to a warm welcome and a few happy, peaceable months at home, and what did he find? A commotion that had sent a delegation of his neighbours to meet him on the sands! Oh! If only he were not so incurably civilised! This time he should really take her across his knees and spank the daylights out of her! By God, this time . . .

He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye, turned and saw his daughter Mary coming down the garden path, followed

by a cat and a dog. The sight of her filled him with tenderness, but the dog seemed to symbolise the chaos that had struck his home. It was the stable dog, a filthy old bitch that had never been allowed in the house, let alone the garden. Yet there the mongrel came, breathless with obesity, her tits, elongated by perpetual maternity, brushing the gravel. The three stopped in front of him and the child said, without a greeting, as if they had interrupted their conversation only moments before, 'Close your eyes.'

'Why?'

'I have a prize for you. Close your eyes.'

He closed his eyes. There was a small rustling sound; some insects settled on his hands.

'Open your eyes.'

He opened them. His hands were covered with small bits of paper; so were his lap, his shoulders and his hair. More scraps of paper came fluttering down, handfuls of them, which she tossed at him from her apron pocket, as if she were sowing. She went on covering him with bits of paper until there were none left, then she looked at him with satisfaction and said, 'There.'

'What is the meaning of that, pray?'

'It is snow.'

'I see.'

'I made it for you. Nobody else knew.'

He saw himself as he sat there: a furious man covered with bits of paper.

'I have something to show you,' she said. 'Look.' She came close and opened her mouth in front of his nose. It was small and vulnerable, with the pink innocence of childhood. 'Do you see it?'

'What?'

'My new tooth, in the back. Look.' She opened her mouth wider. He peered inside; there was indeed a small white speck on the left side of the lower jaw.

She closed her mouth. 'Did you see it?'

'I did.'

'I kept it a secret. Somebody else may have seen it, though, without me wanting to. She may have peeked in my mouth when I called her.'

'Who?'

She pointed at the cat. 'Here, tell me if you can see it.' She brought her face close to his and called, 'Cassie! Cassie!' opening her mouth wide.

'Yes,' he said. 'If thou didst call her that close, she has seen it.'

'I do not think *she* did, though.' She pointed at the old mongrel panting in the sun. 'Look.' She called, 'Mimi! Mimi! Mimi!' barely parting her lips. The mongrel, with the ingrained sense of guilt that went with her low station, laid her ears flat and licked her nose in preventive ingratiation.

'Thou art right,' he said. 'She can't have.'

'I'll show her now.' She knelt, took the wary old dog's head between her hands and said, 'A-a-a-h A-a-a-h.' The abused animal rolled over in abject surrender. She said, 'She saw it,' got up and came back to him. She gazed into his eyes from close quarters, one after the other. Then she asked, 'Shall I tell you about the mouse?'

'Last time it was in the attic, visiting the bats.'

'Now,' she said, 'it is dead.'

'Ah?'

'While you were gone it went dead and was buried. But it got bored and got up again, and then it decided to go on the circuit. The mouse circuit, with a little coach, and when it came to Lancaster . . .'

It became a long, rambling story which she obviously made up as she went along. She leaned against his knee; her small white hands moved gracefully against the red background of the roses while she drew him, with feminine subtlety, into her world.

Seen from that world, Margaret's latest outrage was hilarious. She had gone through many bizarre phases, but never a conversion. He should go inside and find out what the devil it was all about.

* * *

Margaret Fell watched them from the window of the upstairs landing, delighted to see little Mary break through his brooding anger. When they came in, hand in hand, she faced him with brave composure; the sight of the bits of paper on his wig and shoulders made her feel like laughing. He gave her a withering look and strode, without a word, into the hall, where the girls were waiting for him with trepidation. It was obviously not the right moment for them to sing the madrigal they had rehearsed, so, behaving as if nothing had happened, she kept the conversation on a harmless level by inducing them to chat incoherently about their various activites during his absence. He listened

to them as he would to a long-winded witness; he had never been particularly close to the other girls. He asked after young George; when she told him that he was in bed after a fall from his horse, he asked, 'Nothing serious, I hope?'

'No, no, more shock than anything else. But I am sure he would love to see thee.'

'Anon. Now shall you and I go and have a word together? It would appear to be overdue.'

Oh dear, oh dear. 'You' was always a sure sign of exasperation.

'Yes,' she said, in the refined voice she affected whenever she began to feel unsure of herself. 'That would seem a splendid idea.'

'Would you kindly accompany me to the study?'

She stook the arm he proffered and let herself be guided to his study, feeling like a lamb being led to slaughter. She fully expected him to fling her inside, once they were out of sight and earshot of the children; she almost hoped he would. If only he would burst out of this impeccable courtesy and raise the roof! It would clear the air like a thunderstorm, the whole thing would end in embraces and contrition, after which everybody would at last be able to relax.

He opened the door and bowed to let her enter; as she did so, she almost expected to feel his boot, for he looked cross-eyed with fury. But no; he closed the door quietly. She turned to face him. He looked like the headmaster of a school, about to berate a pupil; his insufferable superiority got the better of her. 'Wouldst thou do me the courtesy of treating me like an adult, please?' she asked.

If it had been her intention to goad him into meeting her on her own terms, she failed. He eyed her with distaste. 'A what?'

'Pardon?'

'I can scarce believe that an adult would commit the follies thou hast seen fit to indulge in during my absence.'

'What follies, pray?' She could not help joining him in his ridiculous formality.

He said coldly, 'Before thou regalest me with my version of thy latest extravagance, let me tell thee that thou very nearly hadst a warrant sworn against thee for witchcraft. And that danger is by no means over.'

'Witchcraft? By whom?'

'By all our neighbours.'

'On what basis, for heaven's sake?'

'From what I understand, there have been incidents that might well be parlayed into manifestations of witchcraft by a malevolent adversary.'

'Mention one. Just *one*!'

'What about the Walpurgis Night that took place in the courtyard recently?'

'What art thou talking about?'

'The night when the servants found occasion to prance naked in the moonlight, ending up in wholesale fornication.'

She cried indignantly, 'Who told thee that wicked story?!'

He stared at her. 'It is not true?'

'Of course not! What dost thou take me for?! All it was was Mabby the skivvy and Harry Martin the stableboy losing their heards! In religious ecstasy!'

'Were they naked?'

'I think it's more important —'

'Were they naked?'

'Yes! But they did not — well — they did *not*.'

'Art thou sure?'

'Of course I'm sure! Thomas Woodhouse was there and he threw wa—' Too late.

'He threw water, I see.'

'But the whole story is pure fabrication! And it was the only time! It . . . Oh! What's the use?'

'Quite.' His voice was so maddeningly urbane that she turned away in exasperation.

'Why start demeaning the whole thing straightaway with — with this?' she cried. 'Why not let me tell thee what really happened? What happened to *me*?'

'I am most interested,' he said frostily. 'Pray do so.' He went behind his desk and sat down the way he did on the bench, to lean back and gaze at her with detachment. She felt outraged and at the same time helpless, as must those who faced him from the dock.

'A few weeks ago,' she started, her voice trembling slightly, 'a young itinerant preacher came to visit the Hall. His name was George Fox . . .'

* * *

As she continued to tell her story, Thomas Fell's attention wandered from her words. He had never seen her quite like this

before. She was a passionate woman who had never made a secret of her emotions, it was part of her charm; but this time there was something disturbing in her passion. On previous occasions, the soup kitchen, the tombstones, there had been joyous, happy excitement; this time there was an element of desperation in her that alarmed him profoundly. He felt his anger subside. He loved the woman; to see her in such torment filled him with concern.

As her story rambled on, he tried to define what he sensed in her and came to the conclusion it was fear. Could it be that she had released a demon she could not control? 'Er — forgive me, my dear, where *is* Mr. Fox? Somewhere in the house?'

She looked at him, disoriented. 'Oh? . . . Oh, no, no. He'll be back tonight. He has so looked forward to thy coming.'

'I am surprised, considering how he has wrecked my household.'

'Oh, Thomas, please!' Suddenly she was pleading, leaning across the desk, desperate, tormented. '*Please* don't, *please* don't fight him, *please* . . . I . . . Canst thou not see? I — I'm involved . . .'

He looked at her eyes. They were limpid, grey, beautiful. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'I'll take him seriously.'

'Oh, yes, please, please . . . thou wilt understand if thou wilt only *listen* to him!' He wondered whether she knew how distraught she looked at that moment. 'He is a remarkable man,' she went on, 'full of love and understanding. Give him a chance to explain himself. To *be* himself. Don't crush him — please, please?'

He smiled. 'From what I have heard, he would be a hard man to crush.'

'Oh, that's where thou art wrong! That's where everybody is wrong! He is so sensitive, so . . . well, thou wilt see for thyself. Now shall we join the children?' She patted her hair nervously.

'Of course.' He rose.

'I haven't told thee half . . .'

'I trust we'll have occasion to return to the subject.'

He went to the door and opened it for her. She hesitated, her face anxious, her eyes searching. It would have been the moment for him to take her in his arms, but he could not do it. Before he let himself be led astray by tenderness, he must know what she was so afraid of.

Arm in arm, they returned to the drawing room.

* * *

'The Andalusian Merchant that returns
Laden with cochineal and china dishes
Reports in Spain how fiercely Fogo burns
In an ocean full of flying fishes . . .'

The high, innocent voices of the six girls blended in exquisite counterpoint. Thomas Fell sat listening, eyes closed.

'These things are wondrous, yet more wondrous I,
Whose heapt with fear doth freeze,
With love doth fry.'

The last chord, entrancingly spiced with a dissonance in the youngest of the voices, drifted, *largo sostenuto*, into silence. He sighed, opened his eyes and said, 'Charming, charming. Children, I must compliment you. That was beautiful.' Aware of their discomfort, he wondered whether his praise had not been warm enough; then he realised that they were looking not at him but at the door behind him. He turned around and saw a young man in a shepherd's smock surveying the scene with a smile of indulgence. Margaret said, 'Thomas, meet George Fox . . .'

Before he could rise, the young man intoned, 'God bless thee, Thomas Fell, awaken thee and set thee free.'

His first impulse was to cut the pompous ass down to size; his wife's anguished expectancy stopped him from doing so. He rose. 'It would seem, Mr. Fox, that a discussion between us in in order. Would you care to accompany me to my study?'

The young man made an incongruous gesture, as if the house were his own. 'By all means.'

In the study Sam Pruitt sat writing at the desk. 'Sam, wouldst thou mind?'

'Oh . . . Certainly, Your Lordship . . .' The clerk rose in a fluster, collected his papers, dropped his spectacles, retrieved them, then, bowing to his master, he let himself out, his arm full of documents.

'Pray be seated.' He indicated the chair in front of his desk. 'May I offer you a glass of sack?'

'No, thank thee, Thomas Fell.' The youth sat down.

There was no point in losing his temper. 'I gather your ministry has made a deep impression on my family, Mr. Fox, especially on my good wife. She took pains to explain to me the nature of your message, but I'm afraid that I did not get the

essence. Would you mind giving me a concise definition of it, if you can?'

The youth's pale blue eyes searched his. Where had he seen those eyes before? The same deceptively ingenious personality?

'What transformed Margaret Fell's life was the truth. It has done so to a great many other people.'

He sighed. 'Mr. Fox, I hope you will forgive me, but as a judge I have become suspicious of the word "truth". In my experience, there are many versions of it.'

The youth smiled. 'That may be so in a court of justice, but in the eyes of the Lord there is only one truth — namely, that every man carries the divine within him, and that it is our destiny to follow its leadings.'

The arrogant presumption! 'How do you determine whether your leadings are divine, Mr. Fox? Are you implying that you are in touch with the Almighty?'

'I did receive a call from God,' he said simply.

'When was that?'

'As a young man.'

'You are not exactly on the brink of decrepitude.'

'I was nineteen.'

'What form did the call take?'

Again the youth's eyes searched his with that familiar intensity. Where the devil . . .? 'How much didst thou see of the war, Thomas?'

'In the way of actual combat? I was a Member of Parliament at the time.'

'Didst thou ever hear of the battle of Penny Drayton?'

'Can't say I did. Where is that?'

'A hamlet in Leicestershire, where I lived. When I was nineteen, there was a battle nearby, a small one, no more than a skirmish. On the King's side, fifty or sixty dragoons. On that of the Roundheads, a few hundred men on foot, armed with pitchforks and flails and axes and a few muskets. I watched them march through the village, carrying banners saying, "*The Lord is with us.*" They were blessed by our priest, told to smite the chariots of Pharaoh and marched on, singing, "*O God, our rock in ages past.*" I was absolutely certain that the banners were right, that God was on our side, that this was a holy war.'

'You joined them?'

'I marched with them, carrying a pitchfork. I heard our enemies before seeing them. They were singing the same hymn.'

'Are you going to tell me that you received the call when you discovered that both parties in a war always claim to represent the divine wrath?'

The youth ignored the question. 'The Roundheads were massacred. I fled with the survivors, hunted down by the dragoons as if we were hogs. Only a nightfall did the women of the village dare to go and look for their husbands and their sons; I went with them. We had to be very careful, the dragoons were camped nearby in the woods, singing around a big fire; they were drunk. There was a full moon, we could see the bodies clearly. Some were still alive. One of the women found her son and began to wail. A guard heard her; suddenly there he was, on his horse, with a lance. The woman fled, I hid in a copse. I saw him seek out the wounded and gore them with his lance, cursing them. He went all around the battlefield, sinking his lance into any body that moved. He finally got off his horse, a few paces from where I was hiding. He talked to the horse as he rubbed it down, tenderly. I could not understand it; he had just killed at least a dozen people with his lance; their screams still haunted me. Then I realised that to him the horse was a person, but that those people had not been human like himself, but Roundheads. Things.'

'Yes, Mr. Fox, war is a gruesome business. Especially civil war.'

The youth contemplated him thoughtfully. 'Every war is a civil war, Thomas. That is what I discovered that night. I asked myself, "How could men do such things to one another and believe themselves ordained by God?" If indeed God had willed us to do battle, He must have willed the others to do battle as well. What *was* His will? What was the truth? I had to find out. Suddenly, it was a matter of life and death.

'So I went on a pilgrimage to ask priests, doctors of divinity. Some said it was a punishment for our wickedness, that God had ordained both parties to destroy one another in His wrath. Others, that we must smite the Popish idolators as the children of Israel smote the Hittites. "But what about God's love?" I asked them. "What about His mercy?" God said, "Thou shalt not kill." Did He mean: "except Hittites, Egyptians, Philistines, Cavliers, Roundheads, the Irish"? Is there no absolute law? I became a pest to them, a fool who would not let them be. I was told to have myself bled, to take up smoking tobacco, to get married, to join the army, anything, as long as I left them alone.'

'I can well believe it.' How young, how adolescent! These questions were natural for a callow youth; to go on agonising over them after the age of discretion was infantile. Maybe that was the secret of the success of all prophets: they asked the adolescent questions that had never been resolved and lay buried in each man's heart until he found the courage to exhume them and face them for what they were: proofs of life's absurdity, the acceptance of which was the door to maturity.

'One morning,' the youth continued, 'after I had returned home in desperation, I wandered into my father's orchard. I was at the end of my tether. I wanted to believe, I wanted the questioning voice within me to be still, to leave me in peace, but it would not, it went on and on, urging me not to take anyone's answer unless it spoke to my condition. I even considered the possibility that I might be mad. Suddenly I heard a voice, "*There is one, namely Christ Jesus, who will speak to thy condition.*" It stunned me. I asked, "Who is there? Who is that? Who spoke to me?" There was nothing, only the trees.'

'Was it literally a voice?'

'I thought so at the time. I know now that it was the voice of that of God in me.'

'If I understand you rightly, you carry within you an element that is part of you, yet not you?'

'Exactly.'

'And that is what you presume to be God?'

'It *is* God. The Bible says so. John One, verse nine. "*The Light that lighteth every man who cometh into the world.*" Every man, not "except Philistines, Hittites or Popish idolators". And that is the essence of my message: we all carry the divine within us, and there is only one, Christ Jesus, who will speak to our condition. But we must receive His words direct, not via interpreters, and live up to them in all their simplicity. If He says: do not kill, then do not kill. If He says: love thine enemies, then love them, without exception. If He says: where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them, then take Him at His word, literally. If he says —'

'Mr. Fox, excuse me: you have so far failed to give me any justification for your acts. Did the divine in you induce you to uproot people's lives, destroy their domestic peace, estrange them from those they love and who love them? Surely, the great command is, "I tell ye to love one another"?'

'Thomas, thy anger makes thee blind. Look. Here I am, like thyself: unique, irreplaceable, never been on earth before, never to be again. Come, try to understand me by being one with me. Let us approach our conflict after the manner of friends not adversaries.'

'Mr. Fox, I am as well disposed towards you as is humanly possible, but you have not settled the argument. You *are* destroying the peace of people's homes in flagrant contradiction of the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, which you exhort us to take literally. It is your hypocrisy I take exception to, not your eccentricity.'

'Thomas, I—'

'You say you received a call. What call? To incite people to interrupt church services, be branded as blasphemers, beaten up, flung into prison? To bewilder and bedevil housewives who have nothing to defend themselves with except their generous hearts?'

'I activate that of God in them. What God leads them to do—'

'Come now, come now, Mr. Fox! You cannot go about the country inciting people to riot and, if they do, disclaim all responsibility!'

'Thomas, each man, each woman is unique; their reaction to the arousal of that of God within them is different in every case. It is not my mission to tell people how to react. On the contrary—I encourage every individual to react to that of God within him in his own manner.'

'Mr. Fox, I cannot let you get away with that. How many unique, irreplaceable ways are there in which to divest oneself of the clergy? It is hypocrisy to say, "I tell people that the man in the pulpit in their church is an interloper, but what they do as a result is up to that of God in them." '

The imperturbable young man smiled. 'I told thee, Thomas, the only way to get to the truth is by approaching one another after the manner of friends. Come, let us enter into silence together for a while. Just sit quietly, allowing that of God to rise within us.'

'I'm sorry, Mr. Fox. I cannot see what purpose it would serve, other than to let you off the hook.'

'As that of God in thee and that of God in me are essentially the same, by allowing both to rise to the surface we would find unity in the truth.'

The man's self-confidence was overwhelming. Then he remembered — of course! 'By the way,' he said, 'I don't know whether anyone else has told you this, but you remind me of Oliver Cromwell.'

'Ah?' Suddenly the youth's serenity, which was obviously nothing but supreme indifference to what anybody else might say, changed to personal interest. It was the final proof: most reminiscent of Oliver Cromwell in the young man was his reaction to the information that he was like Oliver Cromwell.

'Yes,' Thomas continued, 'at one time I knew him well. He too was a man of great persuasion. He too thought himself divinely inspired. He too managed, by his sincerity and emotional power, to convince people, myself included. He convinced me that God had spoken to him, that I should abdicate my own responsibility and follow him, that he had been entrusted with the truth. Before I knew it, I was party to a murder, facing the King not as a warrior, but as his executioner. There he was: a frail old man with a thin, scraggy neck. And I, in my religious rapture, was about to help condemn him to be beheaded. Do you wonder I have mistrusted religious rapture ever since?'

The young man observed him with benevolent detachment, exactly as Cromwell used to look when confronted with an irrefutable argument. 'How many people hast thou condemned to death as a judge, Thomas?'

'Come, come, Mr. Fox, that is unworthy of you. The people I condemned to death were sentenced according to law; what Cromwell requested of us was to suspend the law in favour of his private divine guidance. Alas, Mr. Fox: according to Oliver Cromwell, the King had to be killed for truth's sake. Those were his very words.'

'Oliver Cromwell was in error. God is a spirit of love; truth can never lead to violence, only to unity.'

'I am glad to hear that. I hope you will remind yourself of it in the future. There has been a great deal of violence as a result of your proclaiming your truth.'

'I may provoke violence in those who are confronted by the truth; I myself —'

'I see. To provoke someone else to violence is not violence, is that it?'

'Jesus said —'

'Mr. Fox, you are *not* Jesus! You are, by your own definition, unique, irreplaceable, never seen on earth before and, God

willing never to be seen again! So do not hide behind quotations from the Bible!'

'Thomas, thy pronouncements are based on law, mine on the Scriptures.'

Thomas Fell slumped back in his chair. It was hopeless. There was no way of rattling the man. Like Oliver Cromwell, he was a bull in a china shop; the only way to get rid of him would be to foist him upon some other unfortunate community. It might not be a charitable solution; it was the only one. He had to be spirited away somehow, or he would wreak a havoc from which the town would never recover. 'Mr. Fox, it might be more constructive for us to discuss the immediate future. What are your plans, sir?'

'That is not for me to decide.'

'It's up to God, I presume?'

'Indeed.'

Lord Shorwell, erstwhile Master of Requests at the King's Court and now Cromwell's confidant, had remarked, 'The thing to remember about the Protector is that whenever he mentions God he means himself.'

'What makes you people so sure that it is *you* who have been singled out to implement God's will?' he asked in exasperation.

'Thomas, we are all God's implements. How else wouldst thou have Him execute His will, if not through us? Through the beasts in the field? The trees, the mountains, the rivers? The mission of man is to act out God's will; there is no other living creature. He could use for that purpose. The same goes for God's love: He is unable to communicate His love to us directly; that He did through His Son Christ Jesus, and by Him through ourselves. This is the essence of my message, Thomas: that in order to transmit His love to those in need, all Christ has is us.'

He had had enough. He rose. 'Shall we rejoin the ladies?' He went to the door. 'Sir — after you.'

Margaret seemed relieved at their appearance, as if she had expected only one of them to emerge.

* * *

Something about undressing in each other's presence makes frosty formality seem ludicrous. Thomas Fell was sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling off his hose, Margaret, on the other side, was putting on her slippers, when suddenly the whole thing became ridiculous. 'Well?' she asked. 'Did he explain his message to thee?'

Thomas deposited one stocking by his side. 'Indeed.' He rose. 'Would my nightshirt be wrapped around the warming pan?' He pulled back the counterpane.

'There is no warming pan in the month of May, sweeting.'

He fluffed his pillow instead. What could she do to break this icy deadlock? Suddenly she was overcome by weary despair. With every minute that passed they drifted further apart; soon he would be out of reach. 'Thomas,' she pleaded, 'please, *please* . . .'

He looked at her, it seemed, with a beginning of concern. 'I'm sorry to appear noncommittal about our conversation.' He said it in that impossible formal tone, but she sensed that she had unlocked a door. 'It was rather disturbing, I must confess.'

'I'm not surprised!' she gushed. 'He does upset people, before they really know him! But I assure thee . . .'

He walked away to the tallboy, opened a drawer and started to rummage in it.

She felt her tenuous hold on him slipping again. 'What art thou looking for?'

'My nightcap.'

'It's here, love!' In her eagerness she jumped on to the bed, crawled across it on her knees, fetched the nightcap from his bedside table and held it out to him. 'Here . . .'

'Thank thee.' He took it and put it on his head; she got under the covers and held them open for him.

'Thank thee.' He got in and lay down by her side. Then he said, 'Blast, we've forgotten our prayers. Or hast thou given up prayers?'

'Oh, Thomas!' Impulsively she turned over and threw her arm and her knee across him. 'Please . . .'

Reluctantly he put his arm around her and she rested her head on his shoulder. 'Forgive me,' he said, 'but I'm unable to appreciate Mr. Fox's message. Oliver Cromwell spoiled him for me.'

'Cromwell?' She lifted her head to look at him. 'Don't tell me there is a likeness in thy eyes?'

'Very much so.'

'Thomas!' She sat up, outraged. He lay staring at the ceiling, avoiding her eyes. 'But they are *totally* unlike each other! Cromwell is a — a bully! A bigoted, narrow-minded bully! George is warm and loving and understanding and — and — he has compassion for people!'

'Margaret, I must insist that thou dost not try to impose

thy own dream on me. The situation is too serious for that.'

'But I—'

'This is not a matter of a soup kitchen, or a park for old people. Those concerns were as frenetic at their height, but they were harmless. They may have induced people to exasperation, never to violence.' Suddenly his eyes confronted her. 'Yes, violence. If thou insist on sponsoring that man, thou wilt end by destroying thy family, this house, this town. Thou wilt destroy all that we have built together these twenty years with such pains, such gentleness.

'But, dear heart! He *is* gentle! He is all—'

'Margaret, come to thy senses! Look about thee! What has he done? Set people who have been living in peace together for a lifetime at each other's throats! He caused a delegation to ride out to meet me to plead for peace. He made me strike a child because it refused to take off its hat, something I have not done since I was a stupid youth. Considering all that, dost thou not agree that, however gentle Mr. Fox may pretend to be, his acts, or the acts to which he inspires others, are the reverse? Cromwell too spoke of nothing but peace; as a result we had the bloodiest civil war this country has ever known, and the murder of a King. We can only expect more violence if the man stays.'

'Oh, Thomas, Thomas! What can I do to make thee *see*? What can I say? Oh, damn Cromwell, damn, damn Cromwell! He has nothing to do with George, nothing! They are the opposite of one another!'

'All right, Margaret. Tell me what thou wouldst have me do.'

She looked up, surprised.

'I am serious. I want to know thy wishes.'

'But thou art planning to send him away . . .'

'I doubt whether Mr. Fox can be sent away. It will take more than gentle persuasion to prevail upon him to bestow the blessings of his presence elsewhere.'

'Oh, Thomas, *please*!' she pleaded. 'Stop slapping his face with every word thou sayest! Please, *please*, listen to me, look at me, love me . . .'

'Dearest, if I did not love thee, I would not be in the state I'm in. I am troubled about thee, Margaret. Thou art stricken by a lunacy, a madness. Canst thou not see this man is a deadly danger? That he threatens everything we have? The very substance of our lives?'

'No, Thomas, no! Art thou so afraid to believe? Afraid of what will happen to thee once thou dost accept his message? I know, I was afraid myself. 'I — I still am.'

He looked at her, his concern now evident. 'I thought so. What art thou afraid of?'

'Of — of losing thee.'

'Nonsense. Thou hast me, right here. I want to help thee.'

'But a moment ago — '

'A moment ago I said that unless Mr. Fox goes we are headed for disaster. Don't tell me that his message is valid only as long as he is near by?'

She looked at his wise eyes with a feeling of awakening. Was he right? Was she really convinced, or did George's presence . . .

'Sweeting,' his patient voice continued, 'why dost thou not tell me in thy own words what it is he has convinced thee of? Maybe that is the way to find out what this is all about. Come, lie down, put thy head on my shoulder and tell me. Just tell me.'

She lay down, with a sigh. It was all so difficult, so confused. 'But that is what I tried to do before.'

'I know. But this afternoon I was not ready for it. I still had to recover from what turned out to be quite a homecoming.'

'Oh, I know, I know! I worried about that all along, all along!'

'Hush . . .' His hand stroked her hair, soothingly. 'Just tell me. The same thing, all over again.'

She took a deep breath. 'Oh, Thomas, I love thee so . . .' It was not what she had intended to say.

'I love thee. Now tell me.'

'Well . . . what it boils down to *is* love. We all have a great capacity for love within us. That is, really, what he calls "that of God".' It was strange; some of the meaning seemed to have gone out of the words. Maybe just because she was tired. She remembered the magic effect of lying like this, her head on his shoulder; it always made her feel instantly drowsy, even if she had lain down in a state of tension. The moment her head rested on his shoulder and her knee lay across him, her thoughts seemed to liquefy until they oozed imperceptibly into sleep.

'Tom?'

'Yes, love?' His voice was a tremor in his chest.

'Dear Tom . . .'

There she went, oh dear, oh dear, sliding into sleep.

* * *

As he heard her breath come regularly, he relaxed. It was almost as if she were under a spell of some sort. He had never known her so divorced from reality, so disoriented. Poor, poor woman; what could he do to help her? Obviously, the man had some hold on her, whatever it might be. He had to be removed from the scene. But it would have to be done subtly. Subtly: this was where he knew he lacked talent. It demanded a quirk of the mind that he did not possess. Few did, as a matter of fact; he knew only two men who possessed it. One was Lord Shorwell. In his case it amounted to genius. The other was old Justice Cartwright, who indulged in subtlety almost as a parlour game. Perhaps he should pay Cartwright a visit.

It did not distress him to discover that he needed help. He was secure enough in his authority never to hesitate to seek advice. Old Cartwright would know how to coax the bull out of the china shop without the young monster realising what was happening. He would go to see him first thing the next morning.

He fell asleep in the peace of postponement.

* * *

In the attic over the stables, George Fox lay staring at the square of night in the little window overhead. A few stars quivered in the darkness; somewhere under the eaves swallows rummaged in their nests.

'God . . .' he thought, slowly, hypnotically, 'God . . .' The stillness of the Presence enveloped him until he was adrift, floating on the infinite ocean of light and love. 'God, lead me. Lead me . . .'

But although God was all about him, numinous, vibrant, an unearthly peace, no sense of direction came from the stillness. All that came to him, out of the depth of his soul, were the words 'Not yet'. He had to stay where he was. Go on waiting upon the Lord, every day, until the command would come, softly, a whisper in the night.

It filled him with the peace of acceptance; yet he felt a small sadness. He would have liked to give these good people some respite, to stop churning up their lives. He knew that his continued presence would create havoc, for by now he had ceased to be a person to the town and become a symbol. They would burden him with all their sins, all their fears, despair, guilt, and end by sending him out into the desert straddled by their demons, laden with their terrors, their damnation. For the first time in

Swarthmoor Hall he felt a quaver of fear. What would they do to him in the end?

Suddenly he found himself praying, 'Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.'

There was no answer, either from within himself or from the silence of the night. The sense of the Presence receded, leaving only the small cold stars, the secretive rustle of the swallows under the eaves, the growing fear in the pit of his stomach.

CHAPTER FOUR

STRANGE, Thomas Fell thought, how the relationship between teacher and student never really changes even if the student eventually surpasses his erstwhile master in the profession. The moment he faced Jusice Moses Cartwright he instantly reverted to the student who had looked up at the old judge with the mixture of awe and rebellion peculiar to their relationship. Even now, whenever he was uncertain about a case, he would occasionally catch himself impersonating Moses Cartwright on the bench. He would put on his eyeglasses, rummage owlishly among his papers, look at the prisoner in the dock and say, in the colloquial tone that never failed to impress, 'Well now, what am I going to do with thee? What would thy decision be if thou wert in my place today? I can tell thee what thou wouldst do: thou wouldst put on the black cap and sentence the prisoner to be hanged by the neck until dead. That is exactly the type of justice thou didst mete out to thy victim when thou tookest the law into thy own hands.' Yet, the device never quite came off. He was not Justice Cartwright, whose homilies camouflaged one of the most incisive minds on the bench and to whom the practice of law was a science rather than a social function. Like his brother Aaron, the biologist, Moses Cartwright had never married or engaged in any of the human frailties that brought about humility, portal to compassion. He was brilliant, resourceful, and if there was in the jurisprudence as far back as the Domesday Book an obscure precedent to justify a sentence, he could be counted upon to unearth it. Even after sixty years on the bench he was never haunted by doubt, let alone remorse, as he looked back on the long trail of gallows from each of which a human being had briefly danced in

the sky at his instigation. He had never considered himself to be anything but a link in a chain of causes and effects forged out of pure logic. Putting logic into practice involved, for some reason, the colloquial homilies with which he presented his findings; their rank hypocrisy was never apparent to anyone in the court-room.

At the first sight of those beaming blue eyes, that hearty, ruddy face creased with wrinkles of merriment, Thomas instantly fell prone again to the delusion that his old master was warmhearted, humane, all-forgiving, the ideal father. 'Come in, come in, me boy! This is a wonderful surprise! Mary! Bring more bread! A mug of ale for His Lordship!'

'I broke my fast, thank you, sir,' Thomas said, handing over the reins to Charles Cotten. 'But maybe my man would appreciate it.'

'By all means!' the old man cried genially to the groom. 'Go round to the kitchen, lad! Help thyself to anything thou fanciest, bread, beef, wenches . . .' He winked bawdily; maybe his performance as a human being was so convincing because of his own implicit belief in it. He was so devoid of normal feelings that he had no standard by which to judge his own humanity, just as a person devoid of a sense of humour can think of himself, in all sincerity, as a wit. He seemed unchanged since the last time they had met; so did his brother, who stuck his head out of the door of his laboratory when they entered the hall and retracted it, like a turtle, the moment he saw them. All that had aged was the house and the servants; the housekeeper white-haired now and thinner, the furniture somewhat threadbare, as were the curtains.

'And what brings me the pleasure of thy visit, dear boy?' the old man inquired, pulling out a chair for him at the breakfast table, which looked unappetising. 'I hear thou hast been appointed Vice Chancellor of the County Palatine! Congratulations, me boy, congratulations; I have reason to be proud of thee.'

'Moses!' a cantankerous voice screeched in the passage. 'Was it thou who covered up the tank with my tadpoles?'

The old justice looked at his pupil with an amused expression. 'I haven't touched thy tadpoles for thirty-five years! I haven't even been inside thy smelly workshop since last Christmas!'

'Well, somebody did!' the voice snarled, closer. 'Three of them are floating in the scum, before I even touched their tails!' He

loomed, skeletal, in the doorway, clad in a shapeless smock.

'Say good morning to our good friend Thomas Fell,' his brother said amiably. 'Come and join us.'

'Thomas Fell? I thought he was Lester Peacock.' Aaron came to the table and sat down, stretching out a clawlike hand towards a basket of clapbread.

'Lester Peacock! Lester Peacock was five foot three, stuttered and, what's more, he's dead. Thou wert at his funeral.'

'Oh, well,' Aaron muttered, grabbing a bun. 'We are all the same to the worms.'

'Well,' the old justice said, dismissing him. 'What can I do for thee? Another of thy tricky cases?'

Thomas smiled. 'This time I am in a real quandary. Let me explain . . .'

He proceeded to present the facts as economically as possible, the way he had been taught by the uncompromising old man who sat listening with his craggy face frozen in a meaningless smile of bonhomie while his little eyes observed him with unnerving detachment. The brother, as in the past, did his best to be a nuisance by emptying the basket of clapbread, munching noisily, muttering.

'Interesting,' the old justice said finally, with the smile he affected when faced with a challenging problem or a succulent dish. 'I have heard about this Fox. Persuasive fellow. So, all thou wants to achieve is to remove him from the scene?'

'Yes.'

'No conviction?'

'No.'

'First thing would be to prevent his creating another disturbance in church.'

'How?'

The old man smiled. 'Suggest he hold his Sunday services in thy house.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'No surer means of keeping a preacher away from someone else's sermons than giving him a congregation of his own. If thou wert to stipulate an hour that coincides with the church service, it would ensure the peace, at least for the next few weeks.'

'I am sure it would. But — '

'Listen!' The old man frowned. 'Didst thou come for my advice or to listen to the sound of thy own voice? Make up thy mind!'

'Forgive me. Please proceed.'

'All right, then. It goes without saying that thou shalt not attend those meetings thyself. Thou and thy son will attend church and sit in the family pew. Thus thy priest's self-importance will be gratified in a manner under thy control.' There came the spectacles, which served only as an attribute of humanity. 'Next thy priest and as many clerics from neighbouring towns as possible must be prevailed upon to lodge a complaint of blasphemy against Fox. The complaint will be presented to thee, and thou wilt put it on the docket at the next Assizes. Thou wilt decide, however, that this is a case for the clergy. By law, only the church is competent to rule on what constitutes blasphemy; but the verdict must be supported by two secular justices presiding over the proceedings. One of the two, *ex officio*, being thyself. Who is second justice this session?'

'William Best.'

'Where does he stand in this matter?'

'He was part of the delegation that rode out to meet me. He said, only to keep himself informed.'

'Dost thou believe him?'

'Yes.'

'Sawrey and the priest consider him to be one of their own?'

'I gather so.'

'Then he will be the man to suggest to the priest that he take up contact with his colleagues regarding the complaint against Fox, especially with Dr. Marshall of Kendal, a pompous idiot who will instantly make himself their spokesman. He is sufficiently intemperate in his reactions to hang himself, on condition he is given plenty of rope. The beauty of this solution is that he will consider himself to be in the enviable position of both plaintiff and prosecutor. Thou wilt be able to sink the whole thing without a trace.'

'Explain, sir.'

'An ecclesiastical trial is jurisprudence upside down. As presiding judge, thou canst rule out all facts and force them to limit themselves to opinions. There were, in the past, certain acts that constituted blasphemy, like pissing on a saint or defecating on the altar, but those have been removed from the books by the revolution, at least *de facto*. So thou canst rule "opinions only" from the start; they will be tying themselves into knots before the day is over. Let them and Fox fire opinions at each other until they are black in the face, then declare thyself incompetent and send

the whole thing on to appeal, or, if they are sufficiently at a loss for thee to get away with it, declare the man innocent and kick him out into the street. My guess is that the mob will make short shrift of him there, if I know Dr. Marshall. He may be Balaam's ass, but he preaches a mean sermon; he knows how to make the rabble's blood boil. So, thou wouldst be rid of Fox without having had a hand in his execution.'

'I remember the precedent.' Thomas said dryly.

'Which precedent?'

'Pontius Pilate.'

'As a judge: what wouldst thou have done in his place? Roman law —'

He had to head the old man off or he would ramble on for hours; Pontius Pilate was one of his favourite subjects. 'What about Sawrey?'

'Ah, Sawrey!' The old man grinned admiringly. 'Don't underestimate him! Brilliant barrister. He'd go far, if only he weren't such a snob. But that's neither here nor there, Sawrey cannot take part in the proceedings of an ecclesiastical court other than in an advisory capacity, but, of course, thou shouldst keep him away altogether. If he starts feeding instructions to ministers from the floor, he may blow the whole scheme to kingdom come.'

'To keep him away is not going to be easy.'

'Wouldst thou consult me if it were? Would I be sitting here beating my brains out if it were? The priests must be made to launch their complaint as fast as possible, before Sawrey makes it a civilian case in which the prisoner in the dock might be Mr. Fox but the real defendants would be thyself and thy family. Let me tell thee, my young friend, if I were to judge that case, I would not envy thee.'

'I had better go and see Best. This begins to look serious.'

'That, dear boy, is my point! Make no mistake, the moment this becomes a civilian case it is lost, *a priori*.'

'How so?'

Justice Cartwright raised his eyebrows in exaggerated astonishment; he was enjoying himself hugely. 'How so? This man is a Quaker! Even I, in this Godforsaken rathole, know that Quakers refuse to swear the oath! Or has that little item escaped thy attention?'

'I'm afraid it has.'

'Very well, I'll spell it out for thee. In an ecclesiastical court the presiding judge can rule that no oath is necessary, on the

grounds that witnesses will be required not to relate facts but state opinions. No man need swear an oath as to his opinions. They change. They may change during the trial itself.'

'I'm sorry, but in this instance I cannot agree.'

'Thou asked for my opinion, right? Of course thy ruling will be hotly contested, but it can be settled only in appeal. Unless Sawrey is there to instruct them, none of the clergy will know *that* much about the legal implications.'

'Suppose all this were enacted as you suggested, in what way would it remove Fox from the scene, ruling out the possibility of his being lynched by the mob? What is there to stop him coming back to Ulverston, once the verdict is under appeal?'

'Ah!' The old man lifted his finger as if he were about to produce the card up his sleeve. 'The removal of Mr. Fox will be the easiest part of the operation. There is no preacher in this country who does not dream of becoming the grey eminence behind the throne. Right?'

'I'll take your word for it.'

'Imagine thyself as one of those imposters, traipsing around the countryside, bellowing the glad tidings at yokels, having thy buttocks bared at every opportunity and beaten black and blue. What drives thee, if not lust for power? What power was there to be reaped in Ulverston? The answer is easy: Swarthmoor Hall, home of Lord Chief Justice Fell, Vice Chancellor of the Country Palatine. Good going, for a country bumpkin. But give him a whiff of Cromwell and he'll streak after him like a greyhound. What is thy relationship with Cromwell nowadays? Art thou in a position to give Fox a letter of introduction to him?'

'Hardly.'

'Dost thou know anyone in his entourage who might arrange an audience?'

'Yes.'

'Very well. Tell Fox at a judicious moment — on the way to the trial, for instance — that if he behaves himself, answers concisely without stirring up everybody, his case will be appealed and he will be free to go to London, where thou hast arranged an audience with the Protector for him.' The old man beamed.

'But I am no admirer of Fox, and he knows it. Why should I suddenly be overcome by the desire to arrange an audience for him?'

'To get him away from thy wife!' a mocking voice said, surprisingly.

'Thomas turned around. He had forgotten about the brother.

'How old is that Fox?' the scarecrow asked.

'Twenty-eight, thereabouts. Why?'

'And thy wife?'

'Er — thirty-eight.'

'So there.' Aaron stuck his finger in the sugar bowl. 'Religious conversion! Ha! If I were thee, I would go and assert my marital rights forthwith. And never mind *his* fancy schemes!'

'Aaron!' his brother cried sternly, 'take thyself and thy undergraduate jokes to thy laboratory, where they belong!'

'Joke?' Aaron asked, licking his finger and dipping it in the sugar pot again. 'I should say it is. All French farces depend on it.'

'That's enough!' the judge snapped. 'Stop thy nonsense! Back to thy room!'

With baffling meekness Aaron rose to his feet and went to the door. There he turned. 'Babes in the wood, both of you!' He darted out.

Justice Cartwright and his pupil shared a moment of self-consciousness; then the old man growled, 'He may have something there. He can be an infernal nuisance, but there is no better judge of women than he, believe it or not. I could never cope with the wenches in this house; he wraps them around his little finger.'

All Thomas could do was nod. For as he sat there making polite conversation and sipping tea from a grimy cup, he was overcome by a sudden doubt. Could there be something to the old man's words? Ludicrous as the suggestion had been, he suddenly found himself obsessed with the jealous rage of the cuckold.

He knew that Margaret was the last person to harbour adulterous desires, yet he raced home, thundering through the bracken on his cruelly driven horse, ruthless and single-minded. When he arrived at the Hall, boots and breeches covered with mud, he strode into the house bent on violence. He was met by his son George, who nervously asked, 'Father? Could I speak to you, please?'

'Where is thy mother?'

'I — I don't know, sir . . .'

He tramped across the hall, spurs jangling, and looked about him, whip in hand.

'Thomas?'

There she was, on the landing, caught in a slanting sheaf of sunlight. He ran up the stairs, three steps at a time; when he reached her he grabbed her hand. He saw a look of alarm on her face; it gave him a malevolent satisfaction. He led her, without a word, to the bed-chamber.

'What is the matter?' she asked, bewildered. 'What happened? What dost thou want of me?'

He pushed her inside and slammed the door shut behind him. She looked at him open-mouthed, her eyes round with incomprension. He threw down his whip and took her in his arms.

'Thomas! What on earth —'

He closed her lips with a kiss. For a moment she struggled, but it was only her surprise, the momentum of her preoccupation with the household. In the middle of a moan of protest, he felt her respond with a shiver of surrender that moved him to do something he had never done before: he lifted her bodily and carried her to the bed.

There, in a rustling tangle of skirts and petticoats, he took her with a passion that at last enabled him to express what he had been unable to put into words since his return.

* * *

For the rest of that day Margaret Fell lived only partially in reality. Although she resumed her household duties with the customary briskness, inwardly she continued to savour the raptures of love. She seemed to float through her household routine with slow, sensuous movements, weightless as a fish, filled with a sense of utter well-being. It had been a long time since they had made love like this; never before had he subjugated her so brusquely, almost brutally, which for some reason had evoked in her a most passionate response.

The fullness of love stayed with her all day. When time for evening worship came, her husband retired to his study, but she saw that he left his door ajar. She tried to centre down; instead of sliding into a deeper level of silence, however, she continued to plane in the sensuous contentment in which she had lived all afternoon. Eyes closed, seemingly steeped in pious contemplation, she relived the glorious experience, savouring it from the moment he had lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed, sweeping her off her feet as Leda must have been when she was overwhelmed by the swan . . .

She sat up sharply and looked about her, hoping to find the way back into the communal meditation by observing the others. They all seemed wrapped up in their own worlds; George, face lifted, as if he were listening; Will Caton beaming like the cat that had swallowed the cream. Was he thinking about that of God within him? A likely story. About Meg, of course. And Meg? Inscrutable face, very wilful, domineering like her mother. And Ann Traylor, the little red-haired devil? Beautiful child, straining at the leash. If God . . .

'Almighty Father, creator of heaven and earth, sower of stars, caster of suns . . .' George, larger than life in the candlelight, had risen in prayer; he had taken off his hat which he did only when addressing God. A stirring sight; what power, what vitality! '*I'm sorry to disenchant you, but as lovers they are a terrible disappointment.*' As she watched him, Mistress Best's words sounded ludicrous. Just look at him quaking in the presence of the Lord, not like an intimidated coward but like Moses facing the burning bush. A terrible disappointment? He? If he were ever to take his eyes off that of God in a woman, heaven help . . . She recoiled. This could not be she! This was that of the devil in her! She folded her hands and beseeched God to deliver her from evil; as she closed her eyes tightly, pink shapes began to drift towards her again from the darkness, as they had that first time in the garden; only this time they were definitely not Morocco plums.

She opened her eyes and found herself looking at John McHair. Unlike the others, he sat with his eyes open, brooding. He looked very gloomy; he must be worried about something. Gazing at him, she began to share his gloom. She must take herself in hand! If she could not think of pious things, she should concentrate on something positive, constructive. What, for instance, could she do for her husband by way of a treat to welcome him home? Before they went to bed she would serve him the Morocco plums.

She remembered the plums late that night, after they had made love again, this time very tenderly. She had already snuffed the candle flame; she would give them to him for breakfast.

As she was about to fall asleep, she felt an odd apprehension; for some reason, she was suddenly afraid of what she might dream. When she awoke at first light, it took her a worried moment or two before she recaptured a dream: swans gliding on black water, the reflection of a church spire, a joyous peal of bells

that scattered pigeons from the belfry: a silent white explosion in a radiant blue sky. Thank God, perfectly innocuous.

She felt on top of the world, and her bliss was complete when, during breaksfat, Thomas suggested casually that the Quakers of Ulverston meet at the Hall for worship. She could not believe her ears. 'Tom! Thou wicked . . .' The rest was lost in kisses.

At the earliest opportunity she ran to tell George the news. His reaction was disappointing; his eyes searched hers with suspicion. 'Was this thy idea, or his?'

'Why? I swear — I mean, it was his! Not a hair on my head ever thought of the possibility!'

He smiled; it was not a happy smile.

'What is the matter?'

'I wonder what thy husband has in mind.'

'In mind? Dost thou not trust him?'

'I trust that of God in him,' he replied, 'but very little else.'

She turned away, hurt and intrigued. As she walked to the kitchen to confer with Henderson about the day's activities, she wondered whether George was jealous.

'Well, Henderson, what is the programme for today?'

The henchwoman told her, respectfully, with a hint of resignation, knowing her mistress would substitute for it a programme of her own. She had done so every day for the past twenty years.

* * *

It was with a sense of relief that Colonel Best saw Thomas Fell and his young son arrive at the church. He had worried about this morning's service; like everyone else, he expected Fox to return. He had prayed, without confidence, that the trouble-maker might be kept away; if the town were to recover, a few weeks' respite was essential. He wondered about the other members of the family; Fell must have prevailed upon his wife to keep the madman at home, away from the church.

The change in mood brought about by Thomas Fell's arrival was amazing; it seemed as if everyone present heaved a sigh of relief. Even Lampitt must be relieved by the return of the old days of obedience and security that, in a moment of aberration, he had helped to put in jeopardy.

It came as a surprise to Best when Fell accosted him after the service, in the throng of people in the doorway. There were many ears around eager to catch every word; a man of Fell's astuteness

would not have chosen this moment unless he wanted the town to hear what he was saying.

'Good morning, Colonel, good morning, *Madame* . . .' He bowed courteously to Henrietta. 'I would like to have a few words with you, my good friend. Would it be convenient if I came by tonight after supper?'

'But of course. You'll be most welcome. Best hoped his surprise was not too obvious.

'It is my feeling that we should not let matters rest as they are,' Fell continued with a wintry smile. 'Until tonight, then. *Adieu, Madame*; good day, Best.' On his way out he shook hands warmly with the priest, who also, Best suspected, had trouble hiding his surprise.

In the carriage on their way home, he discovered that his wife too had seen through Fell's public demonstration; but then, she was a woman of experience in palace intrigues. 'That is one of the shrewdest men I have ever met,' she said. 'I do not believe that he wishes thee harm, but I would watch my step. He'll have Sawrey and Lampitt hang themselves without their knowing it until after they have jumped.'

'I wish him luck.'

'Yes,' she sighed, 'so, God knows, do I?'

* * *

When Fell turned up that evening, Henrietta Best's estimation of him was confirmed. After the usual courtesies, when the second glass of wine had been poured, he explained his plan. It was deceptively simple. If friend Best would suggest to Lampitt that he get in touch with his colleagues in the neighbouring parishes, especially Dr. Herbert Marshall, they might, as ecclesiastical authorities in the county, issue a writ of blasphemy against Fox and his companion. The writ should then be presented to him, Fell, for inclusion in the upcoming Quarterly Assizes. Lampitt should be urged to register his charge as soon as possible, before someone else in town, notably Sawrey, made it a civilian case.

'I don't think Sawrey would do that,' her husband said.

'Why not?'

'I had occasion to pass a note to him that Sunday, pointing out that he was throwing himself open to a charge of assault within consecrated walls.'

'What was his reaction?'

'He instantly ordered the man removed from the church and handed over to the constable outside.'

'By which time he had already compromised himself?'

'Indeed.'

Fell took a thoughtful sip of wine. 'In other words, you might put it to him that we made this an ecclesiastical case in order to avoid a counter-charge from the defendant against him.'

Her husband smiled at Fell's astuteness.

'As far as I can see,' she said, troubled by their smugness, 'you gentlemen are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. If your verdict were to go against Fox and he were put in prison, it would make a martyr of him. If he were acquitted, he would remain a nuisance. In my experience, his kind of nuisance never diminishes, only increases.'

'Ah?' Fell was courteous rather than encouraging.

But she was not going to be silenced. She surprised herself; to disregard obvious hints was unlike her. But she had a stake in this matter; she wanted Fox spirited away, forever. 'You must realise,' she continued, 'that men like he need conflict, even though they know the conflict will eventually end in their crucifixion.' She looked from one to the other. 'I need not spell out what the consequences would be, were Fox to choose our town for his Golgotha.'

Thomas Fell watched the candle flame's reflection in his wine. 'Would it not be rather a humble setting for that momentous event?'

'Not unless he were offered a better location.'

'Would that not be decided by his receiving a communication from the Almighty?'

'God rarely communicates directly even with His favourite children,' she replied. 'Even personal friends of the Almighty like Mr. Fox are forced to decide what His wishes are by interpreting signs or events.'

Thomas Fell pursed his lips. 'Let us hope Mr. Fox will find a worthier stage for his catharsis than Ulverston.'

'That will depend on his antagonist in the final scene,' she said.

Suddenly, Thomas Fell dropped all pretence. He looked at her for the first time with a natural smile; it transformed him into a beguilingly impish man. 'Are you by any chance suggesting that I give him a letter of introduction to Oliver Cromwell, Madame?'

She was taken aback for a moment; then she answered, 'You must forgive my presumption.'

'There is no need for forgiveness,' he said, rising. 'On the contrary, we will need more of your presumption before the case is closed. Would you do us the favour of attending the trial?'

'It will be a pleasure.' He bowed over her outstretched hand, then went with her husband towards the door, where he turned and bowed once more.

When her husband came back to the little drawing-room, she said, 'Well, well! Thou has never invited me to a trial!'

'H'm,' he said, dourly, pouring himself another glass. 'That means he will have to invite his own wife, too.'

'Well, why not?' She had to admit that had not occurred to her.

'He should not make a social occasion of this.' He took a gulp and rinsed his mouth with it. 'I may be able to sell Sawrey the idea of the ecclesiastical court, but I doubt whether I can keep him away from the trial if all the *beau monde* of Ulverston is going there.'

'*Voyons, mon chou!* Thou canst hardly call Mistress Fell and myself a social prize!'

'A bunch of overconfident clerics is one thing,' he grumbled on, 'but a court of clergy masterminded by John Sawrey. No, thank thee. I would rather meet him in a civilian trial. Using those priests as his mouthpiece will free him of the risk of being charged with assault.'

'But there must be a means of keeping him away!'

'How? Obviously, we have to think of a way. I'm afraid I'm not very good at that kind of thing.'

She went to him and kissed him. 'Dear heart, stop being humble. Be thy old self again, for just the once: bold, dashing — then come and love me.'

With a flick of her fan at his nose, she turned away and left him gazing after her with mournful tenderness.

* * *

He got another bottle from the cupboard, sat down in his chair and put his boots on the table. He poured himself another glass of the sweet liquid and slurped it pensively. Sawrey was indeed the kingpin of the whole scheme. Only if they could keep him away would they have a chance. Was there some lure he could use, to trick the canny little runt away?

Maybe it was the wine, maybe his wife's confidence in him had been infectious; before he reached the end of the bottle he had hit upon the solution. It was ridiculously simple, and if his estimate of John Sawrey was right, it could not fail to work. He looked at the clock; the servants might have gone to bed, but he pulled the bell cord all the same. After a few minutes there was a knock on the door and Kathryn the maid entered.

'Is Bonbon still about?' he asked.

She looked surprised. 'Yes, sir, I think so . . .'

'Tell him I want to see him.'

'The maid's surprise turned into astonishment. 'You want to be shaved now, sir?'

'Don't be foolish!' he exclaimed, irritably. 'None of thy business why, I just want to talk to him.'

'Very good, sir . . .' She shuffled away, closing the door behind her. He finished the bottle, grunting.

* * *

Louis Bonnecharme was trimming his eyebrows in front of his mirror, by candlelight, when his door was opened and a cantankerous voice cried, 'All right, Monsoor! He wants to see you in the withdrawing room,' making him jump and stab himself between the eyes with the tweezers.

He hissed with rage at the fat cow's contemptuous disregard for his privacy. '*Oh, la vache!*' he cried at her. 'Why do you not knock? Have you no *chasteté*, to burst into a man's chambers like *un sacré éléphant*?'

He expected her to retaliate in kind — indeed, he wanted her to; he needed a throat-scalding row for his *crise de nerfs*, but she saw how the land lay. She said, 'Since when are you a man?' and hastily closed the door; the tweezers he threw at her bounced off the door with a preposterous little tinkle. Nobody had the art of needling him down to such a fine point as that waddling ton of female blubber. But for *Madame,* he would have gone back to the sweetest country in the world ten years ago — *à vrai dire,* he would never have left it! But here he was, ageing eunuch lost in hell, victim of stupid instinct — for he had long since decided that his sacrifical loyalty to La Douce Tété could only be explained as blind instinct. Until she caught him in her net he had been a free man, happy, with a glorious future before him. Everybody in the kitchens of the Court had known that Louis Bonnecharme, assistant *patissier* to the great chef Turlupin was

heading for the top; whenever there was some special occasion, requesting tiny delicate *bouchées* or *canapés* or *petits fours* that would melt in the mouth, he was called for. He knew exactly what to provide when a courtier or one of the foreign envoys was planning a *tête-à-tête*. In every gallant adventure it was the *horse-d'oeuvres* that set the tone; his persuaded even the most jaded old *rouè* to feign delicate sensitivity. In his more reckless moments, when he strolled through the servants' gardens dreaming impossible dreams, he knew there must be some pastry, some beguiling little delicacy which would almost blush when uncovered by the silver dome of the tray, that would in its effect upon the mood of the players be more subtle than champagne. At times he would slap his forehead and curse under his breath at the coarseness of some of the courtiers whose boorish brusqueness would have embarrassed a bull. The dalliance of love was enhanced in rapture according to the delicacy with which the senses were titillated — all the senses, not just one. Everything should be brought into play: music, perfume, artful endearments, sumptuous surroundings, the intimacy of insufficient candles and, to crown it all, the most delicate tactile sensation of touch and taste attainable: the little *pouf-poufs* concocted by that magician Louis Bonnecharme, *patissier du Roi*.

His big opportunity came when Chef Turlupin recommended him to his brother, the great buffoon who, together with Gaultier-Garguille, provided the farces after the tragedies staged at the Théâtre de l'Hôtel de Bourgogne. Had it been up to the rabble in the flea pit, those tragedies would have been discontinued long ago; it was the rich and the privileged who kept them going, for they were the ideal cover for leisurely lovemaking in the darkness of the private boxes, which all seemed to become devoid of occupants the moment the tragedies started. When finally the buffoons came tumbling on to the proscenium and the first roar of laughter rattled the rafters, the pale little moons of faces would pop up again in the dark cavities of the *loges*, and the evening of passionate sport would terminate in cleansing, childlike merriment.

He became the head of the kitchens of the theatre, caterer to the rich, the noble and the spoiled cavorting in those boxes. Soon he found himself the darling of the *cocottes*, and he was well on his way to a return to the royal kitchens with enough culinary laurels to unseat his benefactor, Chef Turlupin himself, when he was caught in the net of a nobody, a little amateur from the

provinces, who entered her box for the first time with the trembling terror of a virgin sold to a sultan. As he brought in the first tray of pastries, she looked at him with such despair, such haunting sadness, that he was unable to put her out of his mind and went to see her when the show was over and her *patron* had left.

She sat on the couch in the *loge*, her head in her hands, a picture of loneliness and defeat among the debris: a half-empty tray, wilting flowers, candles dripping their last, her hair dishevelled, her dress open, her provincial little fan on the floor. Something happened to him as he saw her sitting there, something he had never really been able to understand. For she deflected the rising young star from its proud climb and turned the future Chef Patissier at the Royal Court first into her confidant, later into her manager. When he first met her she was an insecure, inhibited dilettante; he created a new personality for her as completely as he created his pastry. He instantly recognised the value of her tragic background; she was a young Huguenot widow whose husband and children had been massacred somewhere in the Camargue. He knew that her fey, doelike temerity might, with the right partner, suddenly flare up into a brief, frenzied spasm of passion that would leave her faint and limp but that would give the most sated rake the almost forgotten sensation of defloration. He discreetly mentioned her exotic attractions to a few gentlemen of his choice; as a result she was before long set up in her own little *salon* by one of the richest merchants in the city, so cultured and tactful that he never appeared unannounced.

Bonbon himself became her major-domo and turned her, as 'La Douce Tété,' into one of the most successful courtesans of Paris. She had the secret of youth, a magic innocence that somehow remained unsullied for a decade, during which most of the influential men of court and city discreetly visited her *salon* to praise his pastry and to press a *louis d'or* into his hand when discreetly ushered out. Her youth, her tragic fragility seemed to last forever, untouched by time; they remained untarnished until Colonel William Best, one of those coarse, *louche* Englishmen, with middle-aged rapaciousness grabbed her all to him. She succumbed not to the man's blandishments, but to some *bourgeois* ideal she had of marriage, which proved she was at heart no more than a little *midinette* despite her airs. Bonbon tried to appeal to her reason, but she allowed herself to be carried off, like a Sabine

maiden, to a Godforsaken outpost of barbarians called Lancashire, a boundless, desolate place with ice-cold, dank houses peopled with provincial boors and bug-eyed females, rank with body odour, whose breath was rancid with haggis and rotting teeth. Convinced that she had fallen victim to a temporary aberration and that she would soon need him to help her return to Paris, he went with her. But something catastrophic happened: before his very eyes he saw her succumb to the one enemy he could not keep at bay: the moment she set foot in England, as if the spell of the fairy that had protected her had been unable to cross water, she fell prey to old age. In one year she aged ten. Horrified, he saw her go flaccid and pouchy, lose her fragility, the dark beauty of despair; he saw her turn into what, in her heart of hearts, she must always have wanted to be: a dowdy, complacent matron. She was content, there could be no doubt about it, but it was a depressing, pedestrian contentment; the incomparable swan of La Couvertoirade sang its last song on the bleak hills of Lancashire and a jolly, waddling duck rose from its ashes.

The same could be said of himself. Tempter of royal tastes, who had catered to the most refined palates of the most civilised city in the world, he suddenly found himself condemned to dish up steak and kidney pudding, shepherd's pie and boiled haddock. Instead of being the undisputed ruler of a household of seventeen servants, he now had to battle in the kitchen with one spiteful, fat maid and scrape every morning the bristles of the hated jowls of his new master, insulted by curses, degraded by taunts about his virility, reduced to a cringing jester.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes and buttoned his coat, bent down towards the mirror to smooth his eyebrows and pat his hair into place for that brute, who would not even look at him and who probably wanted nothing more than a tankard of ale, to be ruined by heating it up with a hot poker. Didn't the man realise that the fires in the kitchen were banked at this hour of the night? His hatred for the conqueror rose like bile to his gullet as he groped his way down the dark stairs, uttering little shrieks of fright as he stumbled, splashing hot candle grease on to his hand. His knock was answered by the usual growl, which even after all these years made his hackles rise; he opened the door and found the Colonel lolling in a chair, his boots on the table, a bottle on the floor, an empty goblet in his hand. Especially late at night, something seemed to compel the man to behave as if he were a

soldier of a conquering army that had requisitioned his own house.

'Listen,' he said as if it were nine o'clock in the morning, 'the hare we have had lately; did you get it from that poacher?'

O douce vierge! was that why he had been dragged out of bed at dead of night? '*Non, non, mon Colonel!* You forbade me! I would not dream —'

'Oh, don't give me that nonsense!' the boor cried, lifting his filthy boots off the table. 'I know you have been buying game off him. All I want to say is: I liked it. I liked it very much. You understand?'

He did not, but said, 'Er — *oui, mon Colonel.*'

'Well, send a messenger to tell him I want more game. Every day. And I don't care what game it is. Is that clear?'

'But, *mon Colonel!* Game every day! One hare will last —'

'I don't want it to!' the bully cried, with total disregard for the realities of the kitchen. 'I don't want bloody hares to last a bloody week! I want fresh game every day, and I want it from that man, and that's final! And I want to be told what he brings in, the moment he delivers it!'

The whole thing was a mystery, but at least he had not been ordered to go down on hands and knees in front of the kitchen stove to heat up a poker for his ale. 'Very good, *mon Colonel*,' he said. 'Will that be all?'

'Yes.'

'Good night, *mon Colonel.*' When he was about to close the door, the voice called after him, 'By the way, there is no need to tell *Madame*!'

He looked around, his eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. But he was careful to hide it. 'Very good, *mon Colonel*. Good night.'

While slowly climbing the stairs, on his way back to his room, he wondered about it. Why should the Colonel suddenly reverse his own order not to buy any more game from McHair under any circumstances, to demand game every day, without respite, until they all had hoofs and furry ears? Why had he insisted on being told what the poacher delivered? And why not tell *Madame*?

If it had not been for that last remark, he would not have smelled a rat. It was completely unrealistic; of course *Madame* would find out. But why try to keep it from her? What was he up to? Whatever the boor was plotting, he had suddenly, after

thirteen years, given his implacable enemy power over him. Bonbon did not yet know what it amounted to, but of one thing he was certain: it was power that at a given moment might — who knew? — prove sufficient to destroy him.

Ah! To take the sweet, befuddled duck back to *la douce France*, to the meadows where the swan had thrived! No man could give her back her youth, but they could, together, drift down the Seine in summer, with all of Paris mirrored in the sky, and remember the days when they were young and the key to heaven seemed to be made of *patisserie*.

He looked at his haggard face in the mirror, whispered, 'Ah, *mon pauvre ami*!' and blew out the candle. There was no curtain; he found his bed by moonlight.

* * *

John McHair was a bewildered, unhappy man. Ever since the night of the riot he had tried to resume his normal life, but without success. Something essential to his prowess as a hunter seemed to have been impaired.

He roamed the woods in Justice Sawrey's park no longer as the uncontested king of the forest; his power seemed to have been eroded by some indefinable corruption from within. He no longer felt part of nature, of the animal world in which for as long as he could remember he had been at home, completely sure of himself. Not that he now considered killing animals for a living to be wrong, he simply was no longer interested in killing as such, not even as part of the inexorable pattern of life in the wild. He could not understand why, but for the first time in his life he found himself thinking about an honest job as he ghosted silently along the trail on his nightly beat, a marauder in the twilight. An honest job! What job? All he could possibly do in the tame, airless society of the town was to be a butcher; but he could not slaughter helpless tethered animals that he had not hunted and forced to surrender by his skill and the power of his will.

What else was there? A labourer, like his father, a serf who would die of exhaustion to be tossed into a pauper's grave? Never. He would never fit into the boot-licking, back-biting community of lackeys to the rich. To hunt for his food, to live with the trees, the birds, the clouds, the rain, the running hare, the dancing rabbit, that was his destiny; he could not conceive of any other. He simply could not live without the woods, the fells

at dusk, the secretive, rustling night, the blue glory of the dawn. But it was as if nature itself had started to expel him, as if he were overcome by some elemental weakness that made him falter at the moment of the kill. It was the spell of that bloody Quaker, those crazy women, that insane sense of brotherhood which left him with his eyes full of tears and his heart full of love for everybody. Like a bout of drunkenness, that's what it was: the effect of one jug of ale on a man was the same as that of sixteen hundred years of Christianity; only this eerie drunkenness did not evaporate after a good night's sleep. He seemed unable to shake off that treacherous weakness, the sentimental reverence for all life which made the motionless hare, paralysed by the power of his will, suddenly take heart and dart away in a sinuous, life-saving bound instead of waiting meekly for the blow. At the crucial moment, when the slow upward curve of his stick reached the point where it would suddenly in one vicious flash strike and kill, his concentration would be distracted for a split second as for the first time in his life he became aware of the resignation in the unblinking eye held helplessly in his gaze. To become aware of his prey as an individual, even if only for a split second, was enough to set it free.

It made no sense. Whatever it was that rose between him and his prey at the moment of truth, allowing it to escape, condemned him to death by starvation, for it simply meant that he could no longer hunt, and to hunt was his life. He tried, instead of clubbing his prey to death, hunting with snare and trap, although it made detection by the judge's gamekeepers much more likely. But it did not work; he could not kill by subterfuge, he had never been able to. He thought of telling Monsoor that he was going away for a while, but he would be mad to alienate so good a customer, or so he felt during the day. During the day everything seemed normal; the moment the twilight settled and the first bats began to swoop from the belfry of the church and the ancient call of the hunt drew him to the forest, that weakness, that spell would creep over him again. It gave him the unnerving sensation that something lay waiting for him in the darkness, to pounce and kill as he had killed so many times himself when he was still the undisputed king of the wild. Like his own victims, he seemed doomed to be felled by some killer, waiting for him in the night, who was not crippled by this eerie weakness.

If only he knew what it was, he would be able to defend himself! He wanted to escape, he wanted to shake it off, but he was

powerless until he discovered why that hesitancy went on paralysing him at the moment of the kill. Why, why, why?

* * *

The trouble about pretence between husband and wife, Henrietta Best thought, is that it interrupts all communication between them. She was sure her husband was nursing some unsavoury scheme in the back of his head. If they had not, for weeks now, pretended that her embarrassing outburst in Swarthmoor Hall had not taken place, she would have asked him outright; but because of their well-intentioned dissimulation the gossamer threads of intuition that linked long-married couples had begun to snap. She could no longer be sure if indeed something was going on or whether the strain of pretence was beginning to tell.

One morning, as she protested to Bonbon about the unending dreary procession of game at supper, she discovered that this was according to her husband's instructions and she became sure that William Best, aged fifty-six, was indulging in subterfuge, with the transparent wiliness of a boy of twelve. How idiotic of him to think that she would not notice Bonbon's sudden transformation from a master chef, whose hallmark had always been variation, into a dull-witted purveyor of hare and venison *ad nauseam*! What was her husband up to? She did not know, but she was worried. To persuade the clergy of the surrounding counties to sign a warrant for blasphemy against George Fox was risky enough; but while she felt fairly confident that Thomas Fell and he would be able to handle the situation, she felt intensely alarmed at the discovery that her dear spouse was hatching some plot of his own. He was not the plotting kind; what made him a poor conspirator was the quality that had once saved her. There always came a moment when, suddenly and unexpectedly, he fell victim to his own humanity. He could scheme and plot like the worst of them; then, like an arrow from the dark, pity, mercy, compassion or whatever it was struck him between the shoulderblades and spoiled everything. That was well and good and she loved him for it, but in the process he was likely to stir up a lot of complications. Now an ancient wifely instinct told her that something of this nature was going on again.

No matter what, she had to find out. She decided to ask him outright, choosing an appropriate moment, for men were ticklish creatures. Sweet reasonableness reigned supreme until some

casual word, a stifled yawn, some innocent curtness caused by preoccupation would trigger an outburst of resentment pent up inside them. Despite her experience, this always paralysed her, as if she saw an avalanche cascading down on her, incredulous that it could have been brought about by an innocent sneeze.

The best moment of the day was during the half hour before supper when they took their *apèritif* in her little withdrawing-room. That evening she stopped him as he moved to get up for their drinks. 'No, sweeting, let me do it this time,' she said. 'Thou art so comfortable right now.' She had learned that to ask a man not to bestir himself because he looked tired would have the opposite result; 'tired', in the male vocabulary, stood either for 'old', in which case he would feel bound to prove his youthful vigour, or for 'sickening for something', which would make him so worried for the next few hours that intelligent conversation was out of the question.

He fell for the lure, and gratefully accepted the brimming glass she handed him. '*Parbleu!* That's very full, my heart!' He spilled some, luckily on the floor and not on his breeches.

'I'm sorry.' She smiled and kissed his forehead. 'I'll put the decanter beside thee.' She hoped she was not overdoing it. 'How is the Fox affair going?' she asked, settling in her chair opposite him.

'So far, so good,' he replied, swallowing a draught. 'Fell should have received the warrant by now.'

'Who swore the warrant?'

'Dr. Marshall.' He chuckled. 'All according to plan. Clever fellow, our friend Fell.'

'How many ministers joined?'

'Thirty-eight.'

'When will the trial be?'

'Next week.'

'And Sawrey?' she asked. 'How has he been taking all this?'

'According to plan, according to plan.' He took another mouthful of wine and disposed of it noisily. Something told her that she had touched upon his secret.

She waited until he had swallowed his next mouthful, then she asked, without any effort at dissimulation, 'Art thou perchance planning to keep Sawrey away from the trial by handing him that poacher?'

'Huh? What's that?'

'Bonbon told me thou hast ordered him to buy game every day

and to keep thee informed of what he buys. The only reason for that can be that thou art planning to keep Sawrey away from the trial by handing him the poacher he has been trying to catch red-handed for years, at a moment that suits thee.'

'But — but how — ' he stuttered.

'Come, come, dear heart,' she said. 'Sawrey wants the poacher. I have learned enough about judicial procedures to know that all he needs is to have the man delivered to him with some marked game by way of proof.'

'But why should I do such a thing?'

'Sawrey would be so eager to get even with John McHair that his attention would be distracted, at least for a while. By the time he began to suspect trickery, thou and *ton petit comrade* Mr. Fell would have acquitted Fox and spirited him out of the duchy. Am I not right, *mon chou*?'

He frowned; then he grunted, 'Never mind. Don't bother thy head about these matters.'

She had no particular fondness for the poacher, but it seemed barbaric to use any human being as if he were cattle. 'Why?' she asked. 'Why risk the life of an innocent man?'

His frown became a scowl, not a very convincing one. 'Nonsense! He's a poacher.'

'Why risk the life of an innocent poacher?'

'What flummery!' he exclaimed angrily. 'The man won't be hanged for simple poaching! Not any longer.'

'I would not put it beyond little Sawrey.'

'Don't fear; if he were to kill that man for poaching on his own land, it would mean the end of his days on the bench. Fell would see to that, or I, for that matter. No, the worst that can happen is that McHair gets a couple of years in prison; and that he richly deserves.'

She did not take his determination at face value. To trick a man into committing a crime only to denounce him at the judicious moment was too callous for him. There would come a point when he would suddenly weaken and make things worse than they were to begin with. 'Why do it?' she asked. 'Why compromise thyself in this way?'

'I am not compromising myself.' He slurped his wine irritably.

'Dear heart, Sawrey is vindictive, suspicious and has nothing to lose. If he finds out about this, he will never forgive thee. Why risk a dirty little man's undying hatred for so small a matter?'

'Small matter? I want to make sure that Fox leaves the district after the trial and never returns! That is no small matter! That concerns the sanity and the peace of this town! So — this is the last I want to hear of it.' He smiled grimly. 'We shall go on having jugged hare for supper for some time yet.'

She knew that further protest was pointless. He was not a complicated man; his shifts of mood were simple and basic. Any further effort to shake his resolve would be sneezing in the mountains. She wondered for a moment whether she could warn the poacher that he was being readied for slaughter, but this was one of those occasions when a wife had to remain loyal to her husband, regardless of her convictions. She could not do this to William; he was sure to find out and her betrayal would be mortifying to him, not worth the price. What was more, she of all people was not the one to throw the first stone.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE small party from Ulverston on its way to Lancaster was halfway across the sands. It was a sunny day, Morecambe Bay glistened in the distance between sand and sky like a ripple of silver. The odour of shellfish bared by the tide was pungent in the still, hot air; the horses, soaked with sweat, stepped nervously as their hoofs sank into the spongy banks of seaweed.

There were a dozen people in the party: Judges Fell and Best with their grooms and scribes, George Fox and, in the centre of the procession, Henrietta Best and Margaret Fell, each sheltered from the rays of the sun by a brightly coloured canopy, and their respective maids.

As they approached the other shore, Judge Fell asked George Fox to fall back with him to discuss the coming trial. George obeyed with reluctance; he did not fear the trial, but he had a growing sense of uneasiness. He knew enough about the way the law was administered to realise that things could be arranged beforehand; Justice Bennett himself had suggested during his year in Derby jail that if he were to ask for a new trial and confine himself to a short list of prearranged statements, his sentence would be reversed.

The moment they were out of earshot George said, 'Friend

Thomas, I do not wish to discuss the trial.' He felt a great relief and smiled at the man by his side in a spirit of conciliation.

Thomas Fell's eyes were as uncommunicative as beads of glass. 'Very well. I merely want you to realise that in a case like this, where the questioning is conducted by the plaintiffs, it will be their purpose to trick you into further evidence of blasphemy. I will have to intervene each time that happens. Is that clear?'

'Yes.'

They rode for a while in silence. There seemed to be nothing left to say, yet the judge made no move to join the others. 'By the way,' he said at last, 'the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that it's time you carried your message to more receptive ears. I mean Oliver Cromwell.'

'That is easier said than done.'

'That is why I brought it up. I could give you a letter of introduction to someone at court who would take you straight to the Protector.'

'Well! At last the cards were on the table. He was astonished at the crudeness of the scheme. It was obvious now that the trial had been arranged by Fell and Best; the whole scheme was such an insult to the essence of his mission that he was about to say, 'Thank thee, friend, I will meet Cromwell when the Lord's time comes.' But the thought struck him: might God not use the schemes of sinful men to achieve His will? He still had not found the answer to why the Lord had sent him to Swarthmoor. Could it be that He wanted him to go to Cromwell, and that the shortest way led through the machinations of Fell Best? For the first time since he had arrived in this bewildering place he saw a possible purpose to his coming. He decided to go to London and confront Cromwell in the power of the Lord. 'Thank thee, Thomas,' he said, 'I will.'

As he said it, he was filled with a motion of love towards the man. 'Do not let it concern thee,' he added kindly. 'We are all at His mercy. If He counts the hairs on our heads, He must be aware of the schemes and the plots we hatch underneath them. Our consolation is that, whether we know it or not, we hatch them at His prompting.'

To him it was utterly obvious, but he had the feeling that the man by his side did not begin to know what he meant. Maybe one had to be guided safely across these very sands against the tide before one could accept one's utter dependence on the currents

and the tides of the infinite ocean of light and love, which was both our origin and our destination.

* * *

The morning of the trial was sweltering. Lancaster Castle loomed, massive and forbidding, above the low roofs of the town; the square in front of it was filled with a milling crowd, as if there were a fair in progress. Vendors of hot chestnuts, ale, paper fans, pamphlets hawked their wares in shrill voices; the crowd was so tightly packed that some people had climbed on to the base of the statue of St. George that had been beheaded during the revolution because of its halo. The excitement mounted when, with angry cries of the guards, a narrow furrow opened in the crowd to allow a sedan chair to pass, carried by two men. By its side strode two justices in full robes and wigs, instantly identified as Lord Chief Justice Thomas Fell and Colonel William Best, presiding judges at the trial. The chaise was carried not to the steps of the courtroom, but into the gateway of the castle, the entrance to the prison. The iron grilles opened and closed; its passenger descended, to vanish into the warden's office. A shriek of fury arose from the crowd outside the gates. They spat, shook fists, bellowed curses, for the chaise had contained not the judges' ladies, as everyone had assumed, but the blasphemer George Fox who, by this stratagem had been protected from the fury of the mob. Judging from the invective his appearance caused, the measure had been a wise one; the temper of the people in the square, incited by the clergy, was such that had the accused appeared in public he might well have been lynched right then and there, as Father Herringdon and Father Finster had been at the height of the Civil War. When finally the doors to the courtroom were opened and the people poured in, there turned out to be not enough room for them all although it was the largest courtroom in the duchy. Many had to be content with standing on the steps outside or in the square, where they would have to rely on messages relayed from the doorway to follow the proceedings.

The violence in the air was such that when a second chaise arrived, this time at the steps to the courtroom, people shouted and screamed, the pamphlet vendors shook their fists at the pale, startled faces inside; it needed three guards with halberds to make room for the door to be opened. Two women stepped down and began to make their way up the steps; the fact that they had been

party to the deception made them objects of rage and derision. Heads bent, close together as if to seek each other's protection, they hurried, stumbling, up the steps. They were booed, spat at, cursed; just before they vanished inside the courtroom one of them was struck on the back by a cabbage. It sent the armed guards charging down the steps. Suddenly from inside the courtroom came the sound of a trumpet. In the silence it created, a solemn voice chanted, 'Oyez, oyez, all rise . . .'

The trial of George Fox for blasphemy was in progress.

Thomas Fell, slumped in the high-backed bench, sweltering in his wig and his robe, looked about the court as Dr. Herbert Marshall, the spokesman for the ministers, made his first long-winded presentation. The hall was packed; the forty ministers sat huddled together like a flock of crows on one side of the dais; Fox faced them in the dock opposite. The heat lay over them all like a pall, stifling, even though the windows were open. Hot sunlight streamed in through the high windows, flies flitted through the dancing sheaves of dust. The shrill cries of the pamphleteers, still vending their leaflets in the square, added to the atmosphere of tension; the hatred in those voices was unmistakable.

Strange, Thomas Fell reflected, that a trial for blasphemy should generate such excitement among the rabble. Were these people really concerned about the things to be discussed here — freedom of interpretation of the Scriptures, the relationship between God and man, the authority of the church? Most of the spectators, if questioned on these matters, would answer with garbled nonsense. No, they had come for the cockfight, the clash of violent emotions; yet it was they who would ultimately decide the fate of the man in the dock. The true judges were not Best and himself, but the rabble in the court, the screaming vendors outside.

The night before, in his rooms at the inn, he had studied a report on Fox's past activities that Sam Pruitt had drawn up for him with his usual painstaking thoroughness; twenty pages of copperplate handwriting telling of incident after incident where the man in the dock had been attacked, manhandled, set upon by infuriated villagers incited by their priests. In the great Minster at York, Fox had been thrown down the steps when he tried to deliver his message. At Warmsworth, people had assaulted him, thrashed him with staves, thrown clods and stones at him, the priest himself had laid violent hands on him. At Tickhill, as soon

as he began to speak in the church, the entire congregation had fallen upon him fiercely, the minister had struck him on the head with his Bible so that it gushed blood. He had fled, staggering, into the street, where the people had knocked him down, kicked him, throw him over a hedge, dragged him through a house and back into the street, stoning and beating him as they went. In Walney Island, a man had come into the meeting with a cocked pistol, asked for George Fox, and when Fox stepped up to him through the fleeing crowd, the man had pressed the trigger, but the pistol had not gone off. The next morning a mob of villagers with staves, clubs and fishing poles had fallen upon Fox, as they believed he had bewitched one of their townsmen, who now called himself a Quaker. The mob, led by the man's wife, had beaten Fox and dragged him towards the sea, where the priest exhorted them to throw him in and drown him. They had knocked him down on the beach, stunned him with volleys of stones; the man he had converted had shielded him with his own body, while the man's wife tried to smash her husband's skull with rocks. The man had finally succeeded in dragging Fox into a boat; the mob had stoned them from the shore until they were out of reach. When Fox landed on the mainland, another crowd was waiting for him with pitchforks, flails and staves; they grabbed him, flung him into a cart, took him to the churchyard, where they intended to put him to death, but he managed to escape. No wonder that Priest Lampitt had found forty colleagues ready to sign the warrant; so far, the clergy had been unable to stop the impetus of the Quaker movement by persecution. Judging by the atmosphere in the courtroom and the town, were Fox to stay in these parts, he would be put to death sooner or later in the atrocious manner these savages reserved for witches.

What was it that drove the man? Useless question. Fell had asked himself that many times in connection with Oliver Cromwell, and the only answer he had found was: obsession. Like Cromwell, Fox was obsessed by a demon that drove him on with the momentum of a spinning top; no man could foretell how many decent people he would drag along with him in his headlong rush towards some violent, blood-soaked Golgotha. How little we know about the forces that propel us, Fell reflected, how thin our veneer of culture, reason and common sense! Take Herbert Marshall, Doctor of Divinity, a not very intelligent but sensible man, more a politician than a cleric. In connection with

George Fox he behaved in a totally irrational fashion, letting his judgment be clouded by passion, submitting accusations that a child could tell him would be thrown out of court as ridiculous. Why? What made a man of stature and learning put himself in a position where he could not help but look like a fool? Was he, like Fell himself, driven to distraction by the instinctive knowledge that if Fox were to be allowed to continue he would cause untold suffering, misery, disruption? What godliness was there in driving simple, uneducated people like that couple in Walney Island to the point where the wife tried to brain her husband? What 'eternal truth' was worth this foundering of two decent people into savagery?

He should not allow Marshall to degrade himself to a point where for the sake of his prestige among the mob he had to destroy Fox rather than let him get away. The arguments should be kept at an esoteric theological level, far over the heads of the crowd in the hall.

The charges against George Fox, as read by Marshall in questions of one sentence, sounded like the ravings of a madman. 'Did the prisoner dissuade men from reading the Scriptures, telling them it was carnal? Does the prisoner affirm that he has stated that both baptism and the Lord's Supper are unlawful? Does the prisoner affirm that he is equal with God? Does the prisoner affirm that God teaches deceit? That the Scriptures are anti-Christ? That he is the judge of the world?'

The preposterous list, read by the normally reasonable Dr. Marshall, sounded tragic. But the ignorant rabble in the courtroom catcalled, whistled, shouted; a raucous voice yelled from the back of the hall, 'Give him to us! Give us the blasphemer!' It took more than a minute before the sergeant-at-arms could restore order.

'If there are any more demonstrations in this court, I will have it cleared!' Fell said frostily. 'Will the defendant please rise and present his answers to these charges?'

George Fox rose, but before he could speak, the shrill voice of Dr. Marshall, taut with rage, interrupted, 'Does not the prisoner have to take the oath?'

This was the moment old Justice Cartwright had foreseen. 'Considering the nature of this trial,' Fell answered carefully, 'and in view of the fact that the defendant is asked merely to state his opinions, not to relate facts, it is the judgment of this court that no oath is necessary.'

'I protest!' Marshall cried. The ministers behind him conferred in angry commotion; again a hubbub rose in the courtroom which had to be subdued by the sergeant-at-arms.

'I repeat that I cannot tolerate any interruptions!' Fell said sternly. 'As to you, Dr. Marshall, you know as well as I do that your protest will have to be lodged in the proper manner with a higher court, after the trial. At this point the ruling of the presiding judge has power of law.' He turned towards the accused waiting in the dock. 'George Fox, pray present your answers to these charges precisely and directly, without digression. Number one. Do you adjudge the Scriptures to be carnal?'

The man in the dock waited, with calm assurance, until the excitement in the courtroom had died down and a hush fell, in which the cries of the vendors outside sounded like the shrieks of distant peacocks. 'No, I do not. As to my dissuading men from reading the Scriptures —'

Fell interrupted him sharply. 'Answer only my question, Mr. Fox! I did not ask what you may or may not have *done*, I asked for your *opinion*. Whether you do or do not persuade others is not the issue; it is your views that are at stake.'

'But, Your Lordship!' Marshall protested. 'On that basis, the whole trial —'

'Dr. Marshall,' Fell said in his most glacial manner, 'the same applies to you, sir. You have presented your charges, now it is the turn of the accused either to refute or substantiate them. You will be given a chance to cross-examine him later.'

'But, Your Lordship! My charge was that he *did* persuade others —'

'Dr. Marshall!' he cried, leaving no doubt as to his exasperation, 'already you are both plaintiff and prosecutor! Would you usurp the role of judge as well?'

'No, sir, no, Your Lordship, but —'

'In that case, please remember that the purpose of this trial is for you and your colleagues to prove blasphemy as defined by law, to the satisfaction of this court. At no point will the defendant's actions be admitted in evidence. Now, Mr. Fox: the Scriptures, in your opinion, are not carnal. What exactly do you mean?'

'I believe that everyone should read the Scriptures,' Fox said, obviously chafing at the bit as impatiently as his opponent. 'I have never tried to convince anyone that —'

'Mr. Fox!' he snapped angrily, 'either you obey the rulings of

this court or I will hold you in contempt! We are *not* interested in what you tried to *do*! We are concerned with what you *think*.'

'But, Your Lordship — !' Marshall wailed.

'Dr. Marshall! One more intervention from you and I will declare a mistrial!'

Marshall and his cronies went into an angry huddle; the courtroom hummed with excitement. 'Silence in court!' the sergeant-at-arms bellowed, at Fell's signal. 'Silence in court!' Of course the ministers had reason to be flustered; good thing Sawrey was not here. He could have prompted them as to how to challenge the court's argument. 'Mr. Fox. proceed,' Fell said when order had been restored.

'As to the Scriptures being carnal,' the young man continued with blithe self-assurance, 'the letter of them is. The letter always is. The letter kills, the spirit is eternal. So I judge it to be the hireling priests who are making the Scriptures carnal, by making a trade of them . . .'

This, of course, set the forty ministers honking like geese; the court exploded in boos, catcalls, obscenities, bellowed threats; the guards had to subdue several hotheads who made for the dock to assault the blasphemer; they were bundled out with a great deal of commotion. The sergeant-at-arms hammered and hammered with his halberd on the floor, his stentorian voice became hoarse with strain. Finally, a semblance of order was reimposed upon the unruly mob.

Fell addressed the defendant. 'Mr. Fox, this is the last time I will let you deviate from the substance of a question. I need not remind you again of the alternative; but, for your information: we can sentence you, *ad hoc*, to a public whipping, two days and two nights in the stocks and a maximum of two years in prison for contempt of court, and we will not hesitate to avail ourselves of that power.' Without soliciting the young man's reaction, he continued, 'Second question, and confine yourself to answering its substance. Do you consider yourself to be equal with God?'

'No, but I consider that I have that of God essentially in me, that God is part of me, as He is of you and everyone else in this courtroom, hireling priests included.'

Again the ministers protested, but the mob was sufficiently interested in what Fox was saying for Fell to let them protest.

'This is not something I invented,' Fox continued. 'This is what the Scriptures say —'

'Blasphemy!' one of the ministers cried. The sergeant-at-arms, at Fell's sign, sought him out.

Fell continued. 'Third question. Do you consider both baptism and the Lord's Supper unlawful? Begin with baptism.'

'Ah,' the prisoner replied, as if he were broaching a favourite subject, 'the sprinkling of infants! Nowhere do the Scriptures speak of it as a sacrament . . .'

He droned on, safely caught in the rut of theology. Thomas Fell could relax; this was better. Somnolence, that was what was needed; soporific involutions about sacraments and their Biblical justification. What for a moment had threatened to be a clash of emotions had, thanks to his dogged efforts at impersonating Justice Cartwright, ended up in the dry sands of exegesis. He glanced at the bench for distinguished visitors, where his wife and Mistress Best were sitting, heavily guarded by halberd-toting creatures of Warden Farragut's. Margaret looked frightened and upset. No wonder, poor woman; he had seen from the passage on his way to the courtroom how she had been treated by the mob and how some miscreant had thrown refuse at her. The savages! What a calamitous notion that they should be able to govern themselves, that England should be handed over to this rabble and their vicious, self-serving priests. As the trial droned on, he yearned for an age when demagogues like Cromwell and this execrable youth would be treated for what they were: lunatics loose in the street with a weapon deadlier than a cannon, mowing down the innocent in the name of a barbaric god.

* * *

The same morning, in the small, airless local court at Ulverston, another trial was in progress: that of John McHair accused of poaching, Justice John Sawrey presiding.

The few spectators on the uncomfortable benches sat fanning themselves with their hats, creating with their slow, hypnotic waving an atmosphere of torpor. Everyone was overcome by somnolence, even the prisoner in the dock, who stood swaying on his feet, eyes glazed, his face slack with drowsiness.

The only one alert and bright-eyed was the witness in the box, Colonel Best's French cook, whom John Sawrey was in the process of questioning. The evidence against the prisoner was overwhelming; all that was needed now was a concise statement by the witness that John McHair had delivered game to the kitchen of Colonel William Best, stating it to be provender from

the parklands of John Sawrey, Esquire, Simon Rutledge, Esquire, and others, lands on which hunting, trapping and snaring of game was prohibited by law.

'Let me go into this a little further,' Sawrey said. 'You stated that on the morning of the seventeenth the prisoner brought in two hares and one partridge which he told you had been snared in the Rutledge parklands?'

'Yes, *Monsieur le Juge*,' the old eunuch replied ingratiatingly, 'many times.'

'What do you mean, many times? Did he state this more than once that morning?'

'No, no, *Monsieur le Juge*. Not just that morning.' The beady eyes looked at him brightly.

'You mean: you had been aware for some time that the game you bought from the prisoner had been criminally obtained?'

'Yes, *Monsieur*.' There was an expression of relief on the witness' face. What was the matter with the man?

'How long have you been conversant with the fact that the game you bought was criminally obtained?'

'Oh, many months, *Monsieur*.'

'You mean to say you were aware all that time of the fact that the prisoner was a poacher, and yet you went on buying his wares?'

'Yes, *Monsieur*!' The man seemed definitely pleased with this line of questioning, despite the fact that he was busy implicating himself. It did not make sense.

'Do you realise that your being aware of the origin of the game and continuing to buy it makes you an accomplice after the fact?'

'Oh, yes, *Monsieur*!' The creature was positively beaming now. 'But it was not I, *Monsieur*! I am only a servant following instructions.'

Sawrey instantly drew back, irritated. The old buzzard wanted to embarrass William Best, his master. Vicious old frog — he would take care of him. 'Nonsense!' he said sharply. 'Whether you are servant or master is immaterial. Whoever may have paid for the game, your master reported the crime as soon as he became aware of it.'

'Oh, but he did not, *Monsieur le Juge*!' The old freak fixed him again with his beady, eager eyes; there could be no doubt that he was urging him to probe further.

'What do you mean?'

'I was told to buy game from John McHair every day, and to keep my master informed of what I bought, even though we all knew that it had been poached.'

It was a nasty little dilemma, and Sawrey turned to the clerk, saying, 'Strike out his last reply and my question as immaterial.' He looked at the witness with distaste and was about to question him further when it came to him: the sudden, heart-stopping realisation *why* the man in the witness box had been given that order by his master. It took a few moments before he grasped the extent to which he had been hoodwinked; he felt the blood drain from his face as he saw, clearly and in detail, the bait he had swallowed. The sudden denunciation of John McHair was part of a plan to keep him away from Lancaster.

Almost absent-mindedly he sentenced the prisoner John McHair to one year in prison — a ridiculously light sentence, but his main compulsion at that moment was to regurgitate the bait; the sentence was a slap in the faces of Fell and Best, who had thought that they could hoodwink him with impunity.

The trial ended with a sudden change of pace from glassy-eyed torpor to undecorous urgency. Sawrey rushed out of court with unbecoming speed, ripped off his gown and wig in chambers and threw them on a chair; thus far, he had always treated the credentials of his office with reverence. He slapped on his own wig and his hat, slung his cloak around his shoulders, ran to the stall in the courtyard where his horse was waiting. He threw himself into the saddle, galloped home, flung a few things into a bag, told his wife that he had to go to Lancaster to take part in a trial and that he would not be back for several days; then he raced off in the direction of the sands.

The tide was out, but about to turn, he could make the bluff of Cark comfortably; to cross from there to Lancaster, however, would be risky. But he was obsessed by only one thought: to get to that courtroom, to throw a cudgel into their unholy work, to snatch the prize from under the noses of his contemptuous peers. Despite the risk, he pushed on to Lancaster across the treacherous sands, his fury unabated; he clattered into the darkening streets of the city that evening and dismounted, trembling with fatigue, in the courtyard of the inn where his doxy was lodged. He hurried upstairs and opened the door to find her bedded down with another man.

Incoherent with fury, he slammed the door on the sheepish

couple, stamped downstairs, snarled at the innkeeper to cancel the room and present the month's bill to the gentleman in residence; then he stumbled into the dark courtyard, where the stable groom had already unsaddled his horse. He ordered him to saddle up again and rode out into the night, slumping in weariness, to find rooms elsewhere.

That was not easy; most inns near the castle were occupied by the ministers and their supporters; only the Boar and Stag had rooms available, but he discovered in time that Fell and Best were lodging there. Sick with fatigue, he finally bedded down in a flea-ridden tavern on the outskirts of the town, where carousing lasted downstairs until the small hours. Sweating, itching, he tossed and turned on the lumpy mattress, unable to sleep, shaken by the sudden turn his life seemed to have taken. His fears gradually lost all perspective; when dawn broke he was convinced that even his betrayal by that faithless harlot was part of the plot. He decided, in his mad anguish, not to go to court at all, but to hide his shame by riding back to Ulverston and holing up abjectly in the home that was not his but his wife's.

With the sun his spirits rose. His self-pity made way for determination. He told the groom to keep his horse stabled, and walked to the castle, mingling with the crowd. He brushed aside the vendors in the square and tried to enter the courtroom, worming his way through the tightly packed throng on the steps. When he was turned away from the doors, he identified himself to the guards and was led to the distinguished visitors' bench. There he found himself seated next to the Mistresses Fell and Best, which honed his fury.

Once he was recognised by Lampitt and the other priests, he decided that, after all, this was the better way. He could intervene in the proceedings only by feeding suggestions to Dr. Marshall. Now, should Marshall receive a note from him, he would read it instead of putting it aside in amateurish self-confidence.

Fell, as presiding judge, was the first to enter, followed by Best. Sawrey saw Fell's glance roam through the court, pass his bench and then, with unmistakable surprise, return to him. Fell whispered to Best, Best glanced in his direction; there could be no mistaking the concern his presence caused them. It was balm for his bruised pride. He felt suddenly confident that he could still frustrate their scheme, which it must seem to them had already succeeded.

At Fell's request, Dr. Marshall rose to begin his cross-examination.

* * *

John Sawrey's arrival deeply alarmed Margaret Fell. Until that moment she had bravely assumed that all was well, despite the terrible hatred of the people in the court and those outside. She had gazed upon George with growing admiration and confidence as he stood there, noble, young, unafraid, radiant with gentleness and love, never losing his patience under the hateful probing of those miserable priests who almost drooled with venom every time they as much as looked at him. Now, suddenly, all that had changed. Sawrey had bowed to her politely enough; why had she such a feeling of danger? She put her hand on her breast to calm the racing of her heart and turned away from him towards Henrietta Best as if to seek the security of her presence.

As she listened to the questioning of George Fox by Dr. Marshall, however, she could not see how Sawrey could exert any influence at this late stage. The trial was almost over; the ministers, in the assumption that their cause was irrefutable, no longer put any limit to their odious ardour. She heard Thomas' calm, authoritive voice ask, 'Is it true, Dr. Marshall, that some of you have stated you would do away with George Fox, should you have the opportunity?' and there came Dr. Marshall's reply, spoken in a high, shrill voice, 'Indeed, Your Lordship! Many of my friends and colleagues here have stated that, could they only lay hands on the blasphemer, they would be tempted to remove him from the face of the earth!'

The audience cheered and somewhere somebody booed. She watched Sawrey from the corner of her eye and saw that he was staring fixedly at the bench.

'We would do so,' Dr. Marshall's voice shrieked, 'for the sake of Christ's church! For the honour of God!'

The cheering doubled in force; but even she, with her limited experience, realised that the statement was self-incriminating; he must have done his own case irreparable harm. The night before, Thomas had explained to her at length how punishment for blasphemy was carefully circumscribed by the law and did not include the death penalty. There certainly was no provision under the law by which the clergy could execute at will people with those opinions they did not agree. All their charges had been answered in a reasonable fashion by George, who had never lost

his temper, never been immoderate, never used any but loving and understanding words, and he had substantiated every utterance by quotations from the Scriptures. Surely there was no case of blasphemy here? The only charge that could be brought was by Priest Lampitt for creating a nuisance in church.

She looked at her husband, stern and aloof in his high-backed chair, a figure of majesty in powdered wig and scarlet robe. Despite his lack of sympathy for George, he must have noticed that there was about the young man's concept of the relationship between God and man a breadth of vision that contrasted painfully with that of the ministers. Even to Thomas it must be obvious that George's version was closer to the message of Christ, certainly in compassion.

'We have one final question to ask of the accused,' Dr. Marshall cried, 'and thereafter we shall rest our case. For we are confident, My Lords, that the blasphemer's answer will be self-explanatory towards the totality of our charges.' He turned towards George, waiting calmly in the dock. 'Do you deny that you, George Fox, plead for the equality of heathens and Christians before the Lord?'

A hush fell over the audience that left no doubt as to the drama of the moment. She saw a look of worry cross her husband's face and he bent sideways to whisper something to Colonel Best without looking at him. Best's face seemed to darken, he nodded, and both of them, she thought, glanced at the man beside her. She had forgotten about Sawrey for a moment; now she was reminded of his presence as of something odious, menacing.

'In Titus Two, eleven,' George's powerful voice replied, 'Paul writes, "*For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men.*" So it behoves us to respect and love all men, Negroes, Indians, Moslems or members of other Christian sects, as our equals before the Lord.'

'I appeal to the judges!' Marshall cried triumphantly. 'This rests our case! Herewith it is proven that George Fox is the anti-Christ!'

There were cheers and shouts; they frightened her, so vicious were they and so full of hatred. All the time she was aware of the unemotional presence of the man by her side, whose eyes never seemed to leave the judges on the bench. Thomas signalled the sergeant-at-arms; when he proved unable to restore order, Thomas himself rose. Instantly the whole court fell silent. The Lord Chief Justice was about to announce the verdict.

'Having taken careful note of the arguments of the learned gentlemen,' he began, in a solemn voice that sent a shiver of awe down her spine, 'this court cannot arrive at any conclusion under the law, or as reasonable and just men, other than that the statements of opinion presented by the accused George Fox do not constitute blasphemy according to the definition provided by the law.'

A commotion started in the hall; she realised that there was going to be trouble.

'During the trial,' Thomas continued calmly, deaf to the rising protest, 'not a single proof of blasphemy has been presented to the satisfaction of this court. What we have witnessed, and witnessed with interest, was a dispute between theologians about the interpretation of the Scriptures. At no point during his testimony has the accused expressed any doubt as to the divine inspiration of the said Scriptures, not has he voiced refusal to accept Christ Jesus as the Son of God. It is these two points . . .' The commotion in the hall was now such that he was barely audible. The sergeant-at-arms rapped his halberd angrily, quiet returned. 'It is these two points,' Thomas repeated, 'that are singled out by law as the touchstones of blasphemy. Consequently, the accused is acquitted of the charge, and free to go as he pleases.' He sat down, and the hall exploded.

'I protest!' Dr. Marshall shouted over the tumult. 'I want to make it abundantly clear . . .' Nobody knew what he wanted to make clear; pandemonium drowned his cries. She heaved a sigh of relief; the fury of the people around her was terrifying, but George was safe, Thomas would see to it that he did not fall into the hands of this rabble. Suddenly she became aware that the man beside her had come to life. He was talking to one of the guards behind their bench, handed him a piece of paper; the man saluted respectfully and took it to the sergeant-at-arms. She was not the only one to notice the exchange; other people in the courtroom began to realise that something was going on. The sergeant-at-arms handed the note to Dr. Marshall, who read it, then looked at their bench with a frown. She saw John Sawrey nod, a smile on his face. Marshall rose.

The courtroom became quiet. In the silence Marshall said, suddenly calm and composed, 'I will at this point, on behalf of the ministers, inform the judge against the accused George Fox and demand that the court make out a warrant for his arrest.'

Suddenly the silence was profound. She looked with a qualm

of fear at Thomas. He sat there unruffled, undisturbed, but when he replied she heard, knowing him so well, that the statement had come as a surprise to him. 'The court rejects the demand, as plaintiffs have failed to present sufficient evidence to justify it.'

Once again the whole court exploded in violent protestations; this time it was Marshall himself who silenced the mob by holding up his hands. 'The ministers . . .' he cried, and as silence returned, he repeated, 'the ministers will petition the Council of State against George Fox. Therefore we insist that the accused be held in custody until such day as said Council shall have reached its decision.'

She saw Marshall glance in their direction; again the little judge beside her nodded.

'The court cannot comply with that request,' her husband answered calmly, 'as the evidence presented and recorded does not warrant impeding the freedom of the accused for any period of time.'

'In that case' — she saw Marshall glance at the note — 'the ministers demand that George Fox be released only on bail. Estate for estate.'

Again there was a commotion in the hall. From the way Thomas conferred with Best she concluded that this must be a legitimate request; but who would undertake to stand bail with his entire estate for George Fox, however much he might deplore the behaviour of the priests? Oh, if only she had her own fortune! She would not have hesitated a second! There was more whispered conversation between Thomas and Best, then Thomas signalled the sergeant-at-arms, who rapped his halberd on the floor. When quiet had been restored, Thomas' measured voice announced, 'Bail, estate for estate, has been presented for the accused to the satisfaction of this court.'

This time the commotion was one of outrage.

'Will both the plaintiff and the accused please approach the bench?' Thomas called.

Obviously, the ministers were as taken aback as she was. Who could it be? Who had been the wonderful, saintly person to put his estate on the line for penniless George? He would have to be a man of substance for the ministers to be satisfied with the amount his estate represented. Then, in the midst of her rejoicing, she saw Sawrey start to scribble furiously and beckon the guard again. He handed the man the note, it was taken to the sergeant-at-arms, who gave it to Dr. Marshall. Marshall read it, rose and

lifted his arms; the sergeant rapped his halberd, and order returned.

'In accordance with the law,' Marshall read from his paper, 'the plaintiffs demand that the identity of the guarantor be revealed by the court, so they may judge whether bail as presented is sufficient.'

It became so silent that the shrill cries of the vendors outside became audible again. 'The name of the guarantor,' Thomas replied impersonally, 'is Colonel William Best.'

Impulsively she put her hand on that of the woman beside her. There was again a commotion in the hall, but this time it was subdued, almost overawed; everybody realised what they were witnessing: an honourable man putting every penny he owned in jeopardy. They must be as flabbergasted as she was — Mistress Best too, by the look of her.

'In that case,' Marshall read with a triumphant note in his voice, 'the plaintiffs cannot accept this bail as adequate. They demand that it be extended to body for body.'

Henrietta Best grabbed her arm and whispered, 'Oh, no! Margaret sat there, suddenly outraged. 'Body for body' meant that, should Fox fail to surrender, Colonel Best would have to go to prison in his stead. The demand was so unfair, so spiteful, that she could not help herself: she threw all caution to the wind, turned on Sawrey and said with intense emotion, 'Oh! You evil little man!' She regretted it at once, at least the word 'little'.

But she made not the slightest impression on John Sawrey. He sat there smiling benignly, totally unruffled, the only person in court who seemed completely at ease.

She looked at the bench and saw from her husband's face that he had no choice: he would have to put George in jail. Then Colonel Best rose and said something. She could not hear what, but she felt from the way his wife gripped her arm that it must be dramatic.

At the sight of him standing there, a hush fell over the courtroom. 'May I ask my learned colleague to repeat his statement?' Thomas asked, calmly enough, but it seemed to her that he was pleading with Best with his eyes.

Colonel Best, in a voice that sounded almost casual, said, 'I will stand bail for the accused, estate for estate and body for body.'

In a stunned silence, he calmly sat down.

'May I request the parties to approach the bench, please?' her husband asked dispassionately.

The mob in the court had recovered from its astonishment; the noise that arose sounded like the buzzing of a giant hive. Margaret looked again at Sawrey; there could be no doubt he was as stunned by the outcome as the rest of them.

'Oh, dear Henrietta! How — how marvellous!' she cried, turning to Mistress Best. The woman put her face in her hands and burst into tears; Margaret consoled her, lovingly, with a feeling of joy.

* * *

Like everyone else, Thomas Fell had been taken completely by surprise by Best's quixotic self-sacrifice; it was not until they were disrobing in chambers, after the trial, that he was able to have a private word with the man. 'What in the world made you do that, dear friend?'

'Oh — er — I wanted to safeguard the sanity of the town,' Best replied, taking off his wig and handing it to his groom, who desposited it in its box.

'But surely the consequences for you personally could be serious!'

'Only if those clerics pursue their petition. That, I am sure, they won't do.'

He had a point there. To see this case through the high court would be a costly business. Even so, it was an incredibly rash act for a cautious man like Best.

'Come, dear friend, we have been in this from the beginning, and I think we owe each other a modicum of honesty, don't you? May I not know the true reason?'

Best looked at him balefully.

'I do not ask out of idle curiosity, I assure you.' He smiled. 'As head of the judiciary, I cannot maintain a judge if I doubt the man's reason.'

Best glanced at his groom, who took the hint and left. He looked haggard without his wig, and much older. The moment the door closed, he said, 'On condition that it shall remain between us: I did it for my wife. She had a grevious experience in her younger years. Her first husband and her children were massacred by the soldiers of Cardinal Richelieu.' It obviously pained him to speak about it.

Thomas Fell hated putting him through this, but he had no

choice. 'Forgive me, dear friend. I realise this must be painful to you, but you will understand — '

'Of course, of course.' Best was quite amiable about it. 'Fox brought back those memories to her. She is a highly emotional woman, and I began to fear for her sanity.' He smiled almost apologetically. 'As a man of honour and — er — affection, I had no choice.'

'But Fox would have gone to prison! Out of harm's way, as far as your wife is concerned!'

'We agreed, you and I, that as long as he was imprisoned here in Lancaster neither she nor the town would have come to rest. Wasn't that the reason for the way we set up this trial? If not, we might as well have saved ourselves the trouble and sentenced him to prison ourselves . . .'

There was a knock on the door, and Fell cried with relief, 'Yes! Come in!'

It was George Fox, accompanied by Warden Farragut in a state of alarm. 'Your Lordship,' the warden said urgently, 'I cannot allow the accused, I mean this gentleman, to leave the castle under the present conditions. There is a mob outside waiting for him, and they're up to no good. I do not have enough guards to provide protection.'

'As I told thee, dear friend, the Lord — ' George Fox began in his insufferable way, but Thomas Fell had had enough.

'Mr. Fox,' he said sharply, 'we are responsible for your security, and we do not intend to abdicate that responsibility, not even to the Almighty, I regret to say. Mr. Farragut!'

'Yes, Your Lordship?'

'Have you a room in the castle where Mr. Fox can stay overnight?'

'Well . . .' The warden obviously did not like the idea.

'What about the provost's quarters? Is anyone lodging there right now? Who is provost this sitting?'

'Justice Somerset, Your Lordship.'

'Well, he lives here in Lancaster. So, put the gentleman in the south-east tower. Tomorrow morning at daybreak . . .'

The door suddenly burst open and there were Margaret and Henrietta Best in a state of delighted excitement. They threw themselves upon their husbands with keening cries; it was startling and incongruous, like being attacked by swans.

'Just a moment, just a moment, dear heart!' From the corner of his eye Thomas Fell saw that Best was also trying to calm his

spouse, who seemed to be sobbing on his shoulder. What a ludicrous spectacle! 'Mr. Farragut!'

'Yes, Your Lordship.'

'Tomorrow morning, at first light, lead the gentleman through the passage at the bottom of the dungeons to the guardhouse in the fields. It is still open, I presume?'

'I think so, Your Lordship; but it has not been used for a long time.'

'I should hope not. Your horse is stabled at the Three Swans, Mr. Fox, is it not?'

George Fox nodded moodily. 'I am not happy — ' he began.

'Very well, Mr. Farragut,' Thomas Fell continued, cutting him short, 'arrange for the horse to be fetched and fed and watered. Then, at first light, lead this gentleman out through the passage, and that will be where your responsibility ends.' He turned to Fox. 'After that, Mr. Fox, I cannot offer you any further protection, and I must urge you to make your way to London without tarrying.'

'Friend Thomas — '

'Mr. Fox, I will not discuss the matter! You shall remove yourself from this county forthwith, and if I find you making any further trouble within my jurisdiction, I'll clap you in prison for disturbance of the peace. Is that clear?'

'London?' Margaret asked.

'As to thee, dear heart,' he said tersely, 'next time be gracious enough to knock before bursting into the judges' chambers. Now, will everybody please vacate these premises and give the justices an opportunity to change?'

George Fox acquiesced. He strode out; Margaret went after him. It was the moment when Thomas Fell realised the wisdom of William Best's decision.

* * *

'George!' Margaret Fell cried, a cry of anguish. Gathering her skirts, she ran after his receding figure, down the echoing corridor. 'George!'

This time he turned around. Breathlessly she faced him. 'Is it true?! Art thou going to London?!'

She saw it pained him. Was it because of the warden or because he hated to be accosted like this?

'I am indeed.'

'But why?'

'To labour with Oliver Cromwell.'

The coldness, the rejection in his voice! Suddenly she found herself in the throes of an anguish that struck her almost as a physical pain. 'Why didst thou not tell me?!' she cried. 'Was it thy idea? Was it my husband's . . . ?'

'Margaret,' he said with a terseness she had never heard before, 'control thyself. I would not go if it were not the will of the Lord.'

Suddenly her anguish turned into fury. 'I don't know about the will of the Lord!' she snapped. 'But thou certainly art obeying the will of my husband!'

His face darkened; the warden stood open-mouthed, fascinated by the scene. It brought her to her senses; she must not make a spectacle of herself, accosting him as if she were a mistress he was about to desert. 'It's not for myself I speak,' she said, recovering her composure, 'but for all those in my house and in Ulverston whom thou hast set on the road to convincement and whom thou must not desert, not yet! Before going to London, thou must make sure that thy new congregation is firmly anchored in the faith.' She spoke formally, vividly aware of the warden's interest.

'I will return in God's time,' George said. He had said it before; now it struck her as insufferably pedantic and wily.

'I see,' she said. 'He comes in handy at times, doesn't He?' She turned away, her stomach sinking at the audacity of that remark. She must get control of herself, she thought as she hurried back to the chambers. She should not allow herself to express these excessive emotions. But ever since she had been struck in the back by that piece of garbage outside the court she had seemed to live on the brink of a scream; never before had she allowed herself to make such a scene, other than with her husband. And in front of the warden!

She set her jaw, patted her hair into place, straightened her bodice and opened the door. Her husband was waiting. Henrietta Best looked tear-streaked but radiant; William Best still had his arm around her shoulders, a touching scene. 'Well?' Margaret asked curtly. 'Art thou ready?'

Thomas raised his eyebrows at her tone. Oh, the insufferable self-assurance of that man! Suddenly all her misery, anger and bewilderment balled together into resentment against her husband. The coward! The devious, conniving coward! Wait till she got him home!

In the chaise on the way to the inn, with Henrietta Best opposite her in the swaying contraption, her resentment hardened as the whole nefarious scheme became clear to her at last. Of course Thomas had engineered it all, from the beginning: the trial, the letter to Cromwell, the — no! Even the permission for the Quakers to meet at the Hall? Could that have been part of a preconceived plan too? And she had been so overwhelmed by that gesture! Oh! The blackguard, the hypocrite!

She could not wait to confront him, but — pox on it! — first they had to sup with the Bests in the noisy taproom of the Boar and Stag. Wines, venison, sweetbreads, drambuie, mocha; it looked as though Thomas were feasting the other couple out of sheer contrariness, knowing that she was chafing to be rid of them. He chatted away, witty, urbane; normally, she would have revelled in his high spirits; now she felt like slapping his face. Look at him! The schemer, the saltimbanco! And that dear, happy couple, billing and cooing like moon-sick adolescents! It was so touching she could vomit.

She barely managed to swallow a bite. Thomas did not appear to notice, let alone care. So she ate nothing, and sat there with eyes like cocked pistols, virtually foaming at the mouth, choking in speechless fury while he went on stringing one fatuous anecdote after another, all of which she had heard fifty times before. He waved his hands in the candlelight, making the couple of geese laugh and titter, as if he were conducting them like the members of a string band. Oh! The *coward*!

Finally, they rose to retire. By that time there was not a soul left in the taproom except a pair of elderly topers lolling like bloodhounds over their tankards. The couples wished each other a profuse good night outside the Bests' door; when at last the lovers had vanished inside, undoubtedly to indulge in some geriatric bundling, Thomas had the effrontery to proffer his arm with a rakish smile, as if about to seduce her. If the footman had not been there with the candelabrum to light their way, she would have kicked his shins; as it was, she responded with a smile of her own, put her little hand on his manly arm and let herself be guided to their bedchamber with the meekness of a dove. Her maid was waiting for her in the room; she dismissed the girl with a smile. The moment they were alone she confronted him, eyes blazing. 'Well! That was a successful conspiracy, wasn't it, my canny friend?!'

'Pardon?'

Look at him! the innocence, the astonishment! 'Don't stand there as if thou hadst been struck in the butt by an arrow!' She was barely able to keep her voice down. 'Thou knowest full well what I'm talking about! What a cowardly thing, what a miserable, sneaky . . . For a grown man! The Vice Chancellor of the County Palatine! Ugh! I would have expected that kind of trickery from a London whore! *Bah!*' She realised she was shouting; to regain control, she turned away and started to undress.

'Dear heart, much as I admire thy performance, would it be possible to inform me what it's all about?'

She swung around to face him. Look at him! The smugness! 'Thomas Fell,' she said with quavering calm, 'we have had conflicts before, we have often stood facing each other without much love in our hearts, but never, *never* have I despised thee! Yes! I despise thee! Bah! Ugh!' She turned away again. Really, she should try to control herself. Hands trembling, she continued to unbutton her pestilential gown.

'Look, sweeting.' His calm, reasonable voice was insufferable. 'I understand that thou art distressed by the tension of the past two days. But let us try to discuss it in an adult, rational manner. Now. What exactly dost thou object to with such ravishing vehemence?'

His mocking suaveness undid her good resolutions; at the sight of his smile, his gloating triumph, she threw herself on him and battered his chest with her fists, crying, 'Swine, swine, swine! Devious, treacherous cowardly *swine*!' It was not what she had wanted to do, it was despicable in someone who called herself a child of the Light. What was worse, it prompted him to take her in his arms and try to subdue her frenzy with a kiss. That made her spit with rage. 'Let me go! Let me *go*, I say! *Let me go!*' When he refused, she stamped her heel on his gouty toe, as hard as she could.

'Ouch!' there he went, the gloating gander, dancing around clutching his foot, crying, 'That was vile!'

'Pray remember we are lodged in a public inn,' she said, suddenly calm and reasonable, but in her heart deeply ashamed. What a vicious thing to have done! But, God help her, he had only himself to blame! First to trick her, then to think he could subdue her with his charms! She turned to the mirror, finished unbuttoning her gown, stepped out of it and crossed to the armoire to put it away. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding his foot. Oh, what a treacherous thing for her to have done!

Suddenly she felt like rushing to him to help take off his boot, which must hurt him terribly; but she checked herself; first she must know what had happened.

'Well?' she asked, closing the armoire. 'Art thou ready to discuss this calmly and reasonably now?'

He did not rise to the bait, but looked at her with a marked lack of tenderness. Well, he would get over it. And he *had* deserved it, richly!

'The whole affair, I gather, was cooked up from the beginning. Warrant, trial, his trip to London . . .'

'Rather.'

She had not expected that. 'Thou dost not sound at all ashamed.'

'My dear, good woman . . .'

Oh, it was going to be one of those speeches. She turned away.

'Let's get one thing straight before we continue this charming *tête-à-tête*: if I had not "cooked this up", thy saintly young friend would by now have been quartered, disembowelled and had his limbs thrown to the dogs. Not to mention what would have happened to our family and the town of Ulverston.'

'I never heard such nonsense in my life! The — '

'Now, that's enough!' he roared with sudden, heart-flipping anger. 'I am sick of thy irresponsible extravagances! All our married life, so help me, thou hast managed to create a seasonal frenzy, but this time thou hast gone too far! Look at the violence of the mob in the square; damn it, thou hast been struck by a dead cat thyself!'

'It was not a dead cat. It was a cabbage.'

'Oh! Merciful Christ!' He rose, forgetting his toe. 'Ouch!' There he went again, poor man, dancing with his foot in his hand. She could not stand it any longer; she was terribly, terribly sorry.

'Here — let me help thee out of thy boot.'

He looked as if he wanted to kick her with it, then he surrendered, slumped on to the bed, stuck out his leg, let her grab hold of the boot and start tugging. He winced and moaned; at last, with a jerk that made him squeal, it came off. She dropped it, knelt in front of him and took his poor foot in her hands. 'I'm so sorry,' she said with sincere contrition.

'Gently!' he moaned. 'Don't touch it!'

'Oh, excuse me . . .'

'I'm afraid this will need an apothecary. Pray bring me that little footstool. Then go and call the footman. See if he can find me someone prepared to bind it up at this hour.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake! I told thee I was sorry! No need to make a whole masque of it!' But she went to fetch the stool and helped him rest his heel on it, on a pillow. 'Now, is that better?'

He looked at her with the same chilling remoteness she had seen in George's face when she pleaded with him to stay. She was overcome by a sudden sense of loneliness. 'Couldst thou not have told me?' she asked. 'Couldst thou not have trusted me?'

'No.'

'Why not? I would have understood. To do all this behind my back . . .'

'I am sorry, dear heart, I do not feel well. Wouldst thou be kind enough to call the footman? I'm in great pain.'

She knew he was exploiting his miserable toe to make her feel contrite, but the sense of loneliness was so frightening that she threw all her accumulated knowledge of the laws of marital combat to the winds and collapsed beside him, her head on the counterpane. Her hands sought his; she held on to him tightly, desperately, as she wept.

But he did not respond. He let her sob her heart out while gazing down upon her, no doubt, with his Chief Justice's eyes. She let go of his hands, wiped her tears and looked up. Yes, there he sat: as cold and indifferent as the stars.

'What if I help thee get into bed?' she asked. 'I'll bind up thy foot myself with a towel. Try to let it come to rest first, before having it bound up by an apothecary and being immobilised for days.'

'I'm afraid I have no choice.'

'*Truly* I'm sorry! I *told* thee I'm sorry! But I didn't think I stamped on it that hard —'

'Margaret, Margaret!' he said in a fatherly tone. 'What am I going to do with thee, once I'm gone?'

'Gone where?' She looked at him, wide-eyed.

'Where dost thou think? My next circuit.'

'When?'

'As soon as I am able to move with this cursed foot. I'll have to stay here until it dies down.'

Much as she loathed the idea of his leaving, she was not going to plead with yet another man to stay.

'Don't fret,' she said, rising. 'I'll look after myself.' She put on a robe and went to the door. There she picked up the candelabrum and asked, 'Now, art thou sure about the apothecary?'

'Rather.'

She wished she could start all over again, come in and face him, this time reasonably, without anger. But if there was one thing life had taught her, it was not to cry over spilled milk. 'Very well,' she said and left, despising him for hiding behind his toe.

On her way to the stairs she passed the Bests' door and was overcome by envy.

* * *

'We should talk things out more freely,' Henrietta Best whispered in the darkness, her head on her husband's shoulder, ensconced in his arm in the unfamiliar bed. 'Communicate with each other. I knew about that business with John McHair and Sawrey long before we spoke about it, and by then I had become, well, bitter ... *Enfin* ...' Had she still not given up trying to change the man? Did she still not realise that he was incurably English? She might as well try to persuade a penguin to fly. And why change him? Why complain about the fact that he grew older, was uncommunicative, rinsed his mouth with wine, was full of puerile subterfuge one moment and awesome courage the next? Oh, that man, that dear, heroic man! Never since saving her from the clutches of prostitution had he made such a sacrifice of love, shown so incontestably what she meant to him. '*Oh, chéri chéri*,' she whispered, 'forgive me, I don't really mean all that. I love thee as thou art. *Je t'aime, mon petit pompon. Je t'adore* ...' She listened, waiting for his response, but all she heard was a slow, soft snoring.

Ah, well, poor dear, he must be exhausted after all those emotions. Fancy, giving away his entire estate, his freedom, for her sake, so she might be free of the ghosts of the past. Did he not realise that what had really freed her, however, was the heartbreaking tenderness of the sacrifice? Who cared whether they lost their estate, their money, their luxuries? She did not even care should the second condition of the bail be invoked, if he ended up in prison, for she would go to prison with him. Oh, yes, she would. Up to now the mere word 'prison' had filled her with — no, no; not even now. She could not think of it. She must

never think of it again. There were things that could not be remembered, even in this utter security, this bliss.

'William?' she whispered. '*Guillaume? Mon amour?* I love thee.'

There was no response. With a sigh she settled down, and was coaxed into drowsiness by his snoring. As she was about to fall asleep she thought: 'Blind, that's what I have been. Everybody has been ranting about saints for weeks, myself included, and all that time, God help me, I had one right by my side. That is to say, if a saint is a person transfigured by love.'

* * *

At dead of night George Fox was shaken awake and a voice whispered urgently, 'Come on, fellow! It's time to go!'

He opened his eyes and saw in the translucent darkness the silhouette of a man he did not recognise. For a moment, disoriented by sleep, he was at a loss, then he recognised the small, triangular room, the lumpy bed, the narrow, slotted window. He was in a tower of Lancaster Castle, the provost's quarters. The man must be a guard, it was time to leave. 'All right, friend,' he said, 'just a few moments and I'll be ready.'

Unselfconsciously he knelt by the side of the bed on which he had lain down, it seemed, only a few hours before, fully dressed. As always, before setting out for a new voyage, he felt the need to invoke the Presence, however briefly, and entrust himself to His loving care.

But the man behind him would not wait. 'Come on, fellow,' he said, touching him again, his voice impatient. 'Do that once thou art in the open. My orders are to get thee out of here as fast as I can. Hurry up. All is ready.'

With a sigh he rose and followed the man out towards the narrow stairway, which was dark and unfamiliar. 'Why no light?' he asked.

'Hush!' the voice whispered below him. 'They are out there in the square, waiting for thee. Now hold thy tongue or we'll set the pigeons off and they'll know we are on our way down.'

A crowd still out there? He could not believe it. Mob violence was like a straw fire: it flared, fiercely and frighteningly, to die down as quickly as it had been enflamed. The whole thing was suspect, this business of having to creep out before dawn through a secret passage, fleeing for his life. He was convinced that Thomas Fell wanted to make absolutely sure he left the county.

The people out there, if there were any, might well be Fell's creatures; he would not put that beyond him. Maybe the whole business about the letter to Cromwell had been a hoax. But no, that part of it was genuine. Fell had told him he would send the letter care of the inn at Bentham. The fact that he had not given it to him here but planted it well outside the county was proof that he was sincere.

'Careful!' the voice whispered. 'Here's a high step, then we're in the corridor. Feel it?'

With his foot he felt a threshold in the darkness and stapped over it. The footfall of the other, walking away, echoed in a hollow vault. Gradually he began to discern the man's silhouette in the darkness, tinged with the first hint of the dawn behind a row of high, mullioned windows. Finally, a door opened and there was a light. He entered the same little office where he had arrived from the chaise. It was lit by a candle on a desk, behind which sat a small man with a beaked nose whom he had not seen before.

'Ah, there you are!' The man smiled unpleasantly. 'Ready to weasel out, eh?'

'Is the gate down below open?' the guard asked.

George looked around and saw the guard's face for the first time, a cavernous face with a scowl of derision.

'Yes,' the man behind the desk said. 'Here, light a lantern, thou wilt need it.' He shoved the candlestick towards the edge of the desk and revealed that he was a hunchback.

'Thank you, warden.' The guard lit a lantern with the candle.

'Well, good luck,' the hunchback said with another unpleasant smile. 'Don't get caught down there. We are overcrowded as it is.'

George felt like giving a loving retort, but the guard would not let him. 'Come along, fellow! We haven't got all morning. Lively, now!' He went to a glass door. Before opening it, he turned around and added, 'Just walk across behind me, without looking around. Don't run, for they'll be watching us through the gate. For all they know, this is a changing of the guard, Take that white hat off, though; it stands out a mile.'

George felt his stubbornness aroused, but there would be no point in taking a stand now. The whole thing had gone too far; all he could do was obey orders and let himself be taken out as fast as possible. He took off his hat.

'Hide it under thy cloak.'

He did so.

'That'll do,' the guard said. 'All set? Let's go.' He opened the door.

They entered a dark cave which George recognised as the gateway. To his surprise, he realised that there were indeed people in the square beyond the gates. As they set out to cross the cave towards a flickering torch, he heard a murmur of voices. Someone called, 'Hey! What have you done with the blasphemer?' The guard did not reply; they strode quickly across. Underneath the torch stood another guard, armed with a halberd, a key ring dangling from his belt. Without a word, the man pulled open a low, arched door on squealing hinges. 'Come along,' the guide urged. Stooping, they entered the deeper darkness.

George found himself on a stone landing with a black pit in the centre. As the guard with the lantern began to descend into it, he realised it was a stairway, presumably to the dungeons. Suddenly he was struck by an unexpected apprehension. He thought it was the stench that came from below, but it was something else, an evil in the air. He knew prisons; entering one never failed to strike him with a qualm of revulsion, but never before had he felt it so strongly; and this time he was not even entering as a prisoner. The only words he found find for the evil that seemed to swirl around him as he followed the guide down into the echoing well, steadying himself on the wall dripping with moisture, were those of St. Paul. '*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in the air.*' They reached a landing, from which a number of dark passages led in all directions; then his blood froze. From the dark, gaping mouths of the passages came a sound he had never heard before, a hooting, bellowing, shrieking chorus of hatred that, unmistakably, was directed at them. He asked, started, 'What is that?'

'That?' the guard replied, his cavernous face twisted in a scowl of contempt. 'That's the beasts we keep locked up in here.' He yelled into one of the dark passages, 'Shut up, you rabble! Shut up or I'll rip your bloody eyeballs out!' The disembodied voices went berserk and he turned away with a satisfied grin. The rumble of the avalanche of hatred was amplified a hundredfold by echoes. Curses, shrieks, catcalls; the din was deafening. As they continued their descent, quiet seemed to return; but when

they reached the next landing the same thing happened. The voice of invisible prisoners shrieked, hooted, booed, bellowed, screamed invective and obscenities, a chorus of shackled fury so ferocious, so insane with hatred, that George wanted to rush headlong down those stairs, away from the unspeakable evil.

But he checked himself, forcing himself to think, 'People, they are people. They are men like thyself. Each one of those men has that of God within him, like thee. It should be thy duty to go in there and minister to them.' 'But no,' he told himself, 'no, that is not possible! I must go to London, to meet the Protector. God wills it.'

The call within him became unmistakable when, on the third landing, the chorus of the damned again assailed them in insane fury. '*George,*' the small still voice within him urged, '*George, go in there. I want to reach them with My love, but I cannot do so without thee, George. All I have is thee.*'

So real was the despair of that of God within him that tears came to his eyes, but he could not do it, he could not, he lacked the strength. '*But I will be with thee, George! I will be with thee!*' the voice urged within him, smaller now, as if drawing away. But he could not do it, he could not; he was afraid.

He continued down the spiral staircase, haunted by remorse. There were four landings; then they finally reached the entrance to what must be the underground passage. As he stood facing a last choice, there came the most terrifying sound of all: a high-pitched, desperate shrieking, accompanied by a rhythmic clanging. It snuffed out the last spark of his courage. 'For God's sake . . .'

The guard laughed. 'Those are our lunatics. That's how they sing, slamming their chains against the bars. Pretty, isn't it?' He opened a gate in the darkness. 'Well, fellow, here goes. Half a mile and thou art as free as a bird. Here, take the lantern, give it to the man in the guardhouse. He'll get it back to me. Don't break thy neck, there are rocks about.'

'Can I get lost anywhere?'

'No, it's dead straight. Half a mile and thou wilt come upon a flight of steps up to a hatch door; just knock and somebody will open.'

George took the lantern and set out.

'Good luck, fellow!' the guard shouted after him, with echoes. 'Whatever thou dost, don't come back!'

As George penetrated into the narrow tunnel, stumbling over

stones, startled by rats, the din behind him gradually died away. At last he reached a flight of stone steps, covered with dust that tasted bitter on his tongue as he raised it with his boots. He was coughing as he banged on the hatch door above him. It was pulled upward instantly and there stood Charles Cotten, Justice Thomas Fell's groom, grinning at him.

'Well, welcome! How didst thou like being buried alive?'

George's sense of failure was so overwhelming that he could not bring himself to answer. Finally, he emerged into the open and found his horse peaceably grazing in a meadow outside a small building. The young day looked precious and pure. Dew was on the grass, mist was rising from a brook; beyond, like a promise, lay the fells, still hazy with the night. After the dungeons they looked inexpressibly beautiful; the sense of beatitude they exuded sharpened his despair. Looking at that blessed world, he felt as if he were sharing a reward he had not earned.

'He's been watered and fed,' the groom said behind him. 'So, on thy way. Don't let 'em catch up with thee.'

He walked towards his horse, mounted and gazed for a moment at the glory of the dawning day. Then he said, 'May the Lord, in His mercy, forgive us all.'

He clicked his tongue, tugged the reins and went down the bridle path on to the fells, towards the hills on the horizon.

* * *

John Sawrey had risen well before daybreak. He slunk out of the inn, leaving the money for his lodging on the counter; he roused the night groom and had him saddle his horse. Towards midday, after a strenuous ride, he finally reached the brogs to Cark and discovered that the tide was coming in. So deep was his depression that he considered riding out on to the sands all the same, despite the certainty of being engulfed by the quicksands, but no, he would not give Fell and Best that satisfaction.

Even so, he could not dawdle around here for hours, waiting for the tide to turn; he would run the risk of Fell and Best catching up with him. So he continued along the bridle path at the edge of the bluffs, planning to stay on it until the tide turned. That might take him as far north as Arnside, but he did not care. He needed solitude, time to lick his wounds.

As he rode into a world of increasing solitude and wildness, his depression lessened. He had merely missed a shortcut to his goal. Sooner or later he would unseat Thomas Fell and take his place

as Lord Chief Justice. In order to achieve that, he would need, above all, a cool head; his worst enemy was this rage, this feeling of inferiority. What rankled most was their concept of him as an upstart, an interloper, a 'little' interloper. Damn the woman! To call him 'an evil man' had not hurt; on the contrary, it expressed some sort of respect. But 'little'! Suddenly his rage erupted all over again, expressing itself in another of those puerile day-dreams: this time he was chasing that arrogant, voluptuous female across the fells, subjugating her in the bracken and leaving her bruised and broken, to be dragged to prison by the constable, the only friend he had in the world.

The thought of the constable brought him back to reality. What was he going to say to him? He might be able to make his wife believe that the whole affair had been a victory; the constable was another matter. He was a slow-witted, slow-moving brute who must already have been bewildered, in a dumb, brooding way, by the ridiculous sentence given the poacher. The devil should have been hanged, that's what he deserved. But to do so now would merely aggravate the situation. Fell would be after him like a demon; the execution of a prisoner without due process could cost him his position, just the chance they were waiting for. No, he would have to keep the brute alive. But he would make him suffer! What about branding him with a 'P' on his forehead? No good. With his broken nose and his rotted teeth, a scar on his forehead would not disfigure him more than he was already. No, he needed a punishment that would keep him from ever poaching again. Cut off his hands? Yes, that would do it. But on what grounds? The trial was closed, the sentence recorded; the brute would have to commit another crime to justify a more severe penalty. And there he was, locked up in a cell, out of harm's way for a year.

He came upon a gorge that forced him to go down to the beach and up the bluffs again on the other side. As his horse cautiously pussyfooted down the steep path, he became aware for the first time of the world around him: the sands, the seagulls, the clouds, the rippling water silver in the sun. He sniffed the pungent stench of seaweed; the smell brought back his childhood: the little island, the cottage on the cliffs, small lair of security he had shared with his mother, a puppy dog and a cat. What had been the name of the little dog? It was so long ago, so far . . .

As if the name of that animal, long dead and gone, were the key to a lost paradise, he was overcome by a sudden yearning for

that state of innocence, that sunlit cove of tenderness. What demon had drawn him away from that world, compelled him to start clawing his way up in the teeming rabbit warren of petty bureaucracy towards some illusory pinnacle of power? Was it ambition? Lust for power? He had always seen it that way and accepted it as such, but as he descended towards the beach he was struck by the suspicion that it was something else, something irrational, some sick compulsion that would not be satisfied even if he were one day to usurp Thomas Fell's place, but would drive him on towards some dark haze on the horizon, some chimeral goal.

For a moment he was afraid. Why not be content with what he possessed? A good wife, land, esteem, power . . . But what about the faithless harlot who had made a fool of him? She was the first woman in his life who had done so, yet she had been the last he would have suspected; she had been young and plump and poor, a virgin when he took her. The thought of her tipped the scales. The worthless whore! The slut! God knew how long she had been clutching louts between her thighs at his expense, in the bed he was paying for! 'That little man,' she must have thought, 'let's stick some horns on his head.' Suddenly it all seemed part of one stinging insult: the faithless wench, the poacher, Best standing bail. The only one at his mercy was the poacher.

As he climbed the bluffs again and continued his ride, he deliberated as to how he could wreak his revenge on that hairy, repulsive body.

CHAPTER SIX

When Bonny Baker learned that George Fox had left for London, he was heartbroken. During all the weeks he had been lying on his cot under the eaves of the stable loft, gazing at the rivers and the lakes in the pine boards overheard, watching flies, listening to the cooing of the pigeons in the gutter, George had come to see him only once.

Bonny had been delighted to see his friend stoop in through the low doorway, but George had been different, subdued, without much to say, watching him with moody eyes, without his usual jolliness. Finally he had mumbled a rambling prayer full of

the words 'love' and 'truth' and left after a cautious handshake. Obviously, George had been ashamed because he had tried a miracle and failed. How silly of him! Of course, it would have been nice if that leg could have been cured without pain and these endless dreary days in bed, but that was not George's fault. All that counted was his friendship; now he was gone, and he had not even said goodbye.

Without Ann Traylor, Bonny would have felt like dying of misery. She turned up unexpectedly that same evening when it was almost dark, ducking into his little room with a candle and a parcel under her arm. At first he thought she had come to fetch something, maybe Harry Martin's mattress. But she had come just to see him; the parcel under her arm turned out to be books. 'Bonny, my lad,' she said, matter-of-fact and rather stern, 'it is time thou didst use this idleness. Thou hast learned how to read in the orphanage, hast thou not?'

He had, but the thought of getting back to it was depressing. 'All right,' she said briskly, 'I'll come every evening from now on and give thee a lesson. It will be late, but thou hast all day to sleep.' She pulled up a stool by the side of his bed, sat down and opened a book. 'Let's see how much thou rememberest. Here, read this: "*Adam ate the apple that Eve . . .*" What does it say?'

'Eve — Eve peeled for him,' he invented.

She looked at him disapprovingly, but her green eyes were not cross at all. '*Picked* for him! Don't guess! Read what it says, not what thou thinkest it says. Next line. "*Adam . . .*" Well?'

'"*Adam* — something *Eve . . .*"'

'Spell it! What is the first letter?'

'W.'

'And the next?'

'E . . . D . . . wedded! "*Adam wedded Eve.*"'

'See? Thou canst read, if only thou tryest. "*Adam wedded Eve, and* — " What does the rest say?'

'D-E . . .'

'No. Thou hast just read D. Look, is that the same letter? No. So?'

'B?'

'Right! "*Adam wedded Eve and b* — "'

'Beg — begat! "*Adam wedded Eve and begat.*"'

'Good! And what did he beget? A — '

'Abel and C-A . . . and Cain. "*Adam wedded Eve and begat Abel and Cain.*"' He began to enjoy the lesson.

She returned every evening and the lessons broke the tedium, but she could not dispel the dull indifference that lay over him like a pall after George's departure. He brooded about it until he finally decided that rather than being embarrassed about the failed miracle, George blamed him for it. One night he blurted it all out to Ann Traylor.

She looked at him with a frown. 'Well, of all the snivelling, self-pitying notions! Thou shouldst be ashamed of thyself, Boniface Baker! George Fox is a godly man, such an idea would never enter his head!'

'They why didn't he come to say goodbye to me? Why did he look so stern that one time he was here?'

'Because he is a man,' Ann answered. 'Some men are good at healing people, but few of them are any good at visiting the sick. That is why I am here and not Harry Martin or Thomas Woodhouse. I did not even ask them, for they would have behaved like George Fox. Something about a sick person makes a man uncomfortable and eager to get away. It does not mean they don't like thee. It simply means they are not perfect.'

'I want George to be perfect,' he said sulkily.

'Don't talk nonsense,' she snapped, opening the book. 'Nobody is perfect except Jesus, and even He had moments we don't talk about.'

'When?'

'Never mind. Fourteenth lesson: "*When Noah—*" '

He wanted to hear about Jesus' moments; it sounded much more interesting. 'What did He do that was not perfect?'

But Ann was not to be drawn. 'We are reading about Noah, and either we go on reading about Noah or I close this book and go away. What shall it be?'

Glumly he read, ' "*When Noah had completed the ark, the beasts of the field . . .*" ' Gloom settled over him again, like a cloud.

There were times when he hated Ann and her bossiness, but after a while he became rather fond of her, especially of the little red curls that peeked from under her bonnet at the nape of her neck and the secret mischief in her eyes; they seemed to give way that she was nicer than she pretended to be. She was very inquisitive; she always wanted to know exactly what he had had to eat, how much water he had drunk, whether he had washed his face before going to sleep; but she smelled nice.

It shook him when one night she came in, green eyes blazing, and cried, 'Oh! I can't *wait* to get out of this place!'

The idea of her leaving upset him. He looked at her with anguish as she dragged up her little stool with an angry rumble on the floorboards and sat down beside him. She held out her hand and snapped, 'All right! Where is it?'

'Where is what?'

'Thy exercise book! Don't tell me thou hast been lying here all day doing nothing!'

She was so angry that tears came to his eyes. 'What's the matter? Have I done something wrong?'

She looked at him fiercely; for a moment he thought she would smack him, then her face softened and she said in a different tone, 'Of course not. It has nothing to do with thee.' Suddenly she bent over and kissed his cheek. He sat there, mouth open, gaping at her. She laughed. 'Don't look as though I had thrown thee in the brook! Hast thou never had a kiss from a girl before?'

He shook his head, his hand on his cheek.

'Well, there's thy first. Now where's that exercise book?'

He took it from under his pillow and gave it to her. When she opened it, he asked, 'What's the matter, Ann?'

'Nothing.' Her face clouded over again. 'They've come back, that's all.'

'The judge and the mistress?'

'No, only she. He is off again. And George Fox is on his way to London, so that'll probably be the last we'll see of *him*.'

'Oh . . .'

She looked up sharply. 'Don't tell me thou art going into convulsions too!'

'I?'

'Thou shouldst hear the wailing and gnashing of teeth in the kitchen! *Oh George, oh George!*' She mimicked them angrily. 'As if they had lost a lover! And Mistress Fell moping around with a face like a basset hound! Ugh! All that over a vain, pompous jawbox!'

'Who?'

'George Fox, who else?! Well, all I can say is: good riddance! But I seem to be the only one. The lot of them are slavering on each other's shoulders, keening like the Welsh. Next thing thou knowest, they'll put ashes on their heads! And why? Don't ask *me*!' She flicked the pages of the book angrily.

'I'm sorry,' he said. He was; but he was not as sad as he would have expected.

'Sorry? Tell me why!' She fixed him with her angry green eyes. 'Explain to me why everybody acts as if they had lost a lover!'

'I don't know,' he said, 'but he was a nice man. I liked him.'

'Why didst thou like him? Tell me.'

'Why art thou so angry with me?'

'I am not angry with thee. I'm curious, that's all.'

'Well, he — he's nice.'

'Nice. After what he did to thy leg? After his coming to see thee only once?'

'He did not break my leg. And thou didst tell me thyself why he did not come to see me.'

'I? What on earth did I say?'

'That he was a man, so he did not enjoy coming to see the sick.'

'Did I say that? Yes, I suppose I did. Well, let's get on with the lesson. What hast thou done since yesterday?'

'He made everybody very happy for a while,' he said.

'Oh, yes, for a while! But thou shouldst see them now! Thou shouldst see that poor woman!'

'Which poor woman?'

'Never mind. Is this all thou hast done?'

'I'm sure not everybody is carrying on that way. What about Harry Martin, for instance?'

'Oh, that one!' Her contempt was startling. 'He's the only one who got something out of the visit of St. George. He got Mabby.'

'Got Mabby? Are they betrothed?'

'Betrothed!' She looked at him as if she thought he needed a haircut. Then, quick as a flash, she bent over and kissed him on the cheek once more, this time the other one. Again it was all over before he realised it. He blushed, furious with himself for doing so. She said, 'Bonny, thou art the only innocent in this Hall.'

He did not like that. It sounded as if she were talking to a child, and he did not feel like a child at that moment.

She looked at him sternly. 'What hast thou written this exercise with? A tar brush?'

For the first time since the lessons had started he saw through her sternness. It was nonsense, really. He gave her a grin and said, 'Yes.'

She raised her eyebrows; for a moment she looked as if she were about to make a sharp retort. Then, surprisingly, she burst into giggles and hid her face in her hands. 'Oh,' she said, giggling, 'they make me so *mad*!'

'I like thee mad.'

'Ha! My good boy, thou hast never seen me *really* mad. Believe me!'

Yesterday he would have been impressed; now he wished his leg were better.

'It's that they call it *religion*!' she cried, shaking her fists. 'That *she* calls it religion! The whole thing is *disgusting*! That's what *I* think!'

'Who is "she"?'

She turned on him. 'Dost thou call it religion too?'

'What?'

'Thy friendship, or whatever it is, for George Fox?'

He looked at her. Her bonnet was askew, her hair tousled with anger. It was as if, without realising it, she was shedding a disguise. 'How old art thou, Ann?' he asked.

She looked surprised. 'Seventeen. Why?'

'I am twelve.'

'So?'

'So nothing. I just am.'

'Oh, what am I *bothering* for!' She turned to the exercise book again.

'Tell me honestly. What is it they call religion? Who is "she"?'

'Never thee mind!'

'George talked to me about religion once, on his horse while we were riding home from Colonel Best's. I was afraid, for I was sure that Mr. Woodhouse or Will Hartford would beat me. He made me feel, well, different. He talked about God and . . . well, that was different too.'

'Wilt thou ever finish a sentence so a person can understand?'

He grinned. Her cap had been shoved up another inch; she was getting younger all the time, a friend, not someone for whose sake he washed and learned lessons.

'Well? Thou dost not wail and whinny and yammer "I'll never experience the presence of God again!" Or dost thou?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I suppose not,' he said musingly. 'I never experienced God again, not after the time on his horse.

But I don't care. I don't particularly want to. I'm happy the way I am.'

'I'm glad to hear it!'

'As long as thou art here.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Aha! I spoke too soon!'

'Ann,' he said seriously. 'Thou art not planning to leave, art thou?'

Her face went blank with amazement. 'How didst thou know?'

His heart sank. 'Art thou?'

'If things get any worse around here, I certainly will.'

'How, worse? I haven't been downstairs for weeks.'

'I wouldn't mind so much if only they would be honest with themselves!' she cried, flaring up again. 'What makes me so sick is the dishonesty, the pretence of it all! Why not say frankly that they like it for its own sake? Why call it religion?'

'What do they like?'

'Calling everybody thee and thou! Calling the mistress *Margaret*! Refusing to doff their hats for priests, constables, squires! Just — just letting it rip, the way Mabby did! Yoo hoo! Off with my clothes, stark naked in the moonlight, setting all the men jumping like rabbits! Thy friend Harry Martin: before you could say Jack Robinson, there he was without a stitch, galloping after her, ready to — well, never mind. Anyway, that's what I mean! Do it, but don't call it religion! *That's* blasphemous! Yes, blasphemous. I wish they had locked him up, white hat and all. For, judging by the results, that's all his message amounted to: Let's raise the devil! And why? Because we love it! I'd love it too, damn it. I like mischief as much as the next one, but I know that isn't God! If it is . . .' Suddenly she crossed herself.

'Ann!' he said, astounded. 'Art thou a Papist?'

'Why dost thou ask such a fool thing?'

'Because thou didst cross thyself.'

'Oh, stop it! It's just — just a sign against the hex. Think of thy lesson!' She turned to the book again.

'Ann . . .'

'Well?'

'Thou wouldst not want to do that, wouldst thou?'

'What?'

'Take all thy clothes off in front of — of everyone?'

She looked at him stonily. 'Boniface Baker, thou knowest very

well I was not talking about *myself*. I was talking about Mabby.'

'Ann?'

'Now what?'

'Don't go away.'

He saw her eyes change as she looked at him. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I shouldn't have said that.'

'But if it's true . . .'

'It isn't true! I just said it because I was angry. Where would I go? I'm like thee, I'll never get out of this place. I've got nobody. But a person can dream, can't she?'

'Why shouldn't we get out?'

'Where wouldst thou go? None of the houses here will take thee in unless thou hast a letter of recommendation. And Thomas Woodhouse is not going to give that to thee, just like that. Ha! That's where his religion would stop in a hurry.'

'Art thou an orphan?'

'Yes.'

'A foundling?'

'Sometimes I wish I had been.'

'Why?'

'My father was a drunkard. Now can we get on with the lesson?'

'Maybe mine was too. I don't know.'

'Dost thou want a lesson tonight or no?'

'No.'

'All right!' She snapped the exercise book shut. 'In that case I bid thee good night.' She rose.

'Ann!'

Her eyes, as she looked down on him, were green and fiery. Her cap now sat on the back of her head.

'Wilt thou have meeting with me?'

'Pardon?'

'Those times we all sat in a circle and said nothing, I liked that. Can't we do that, the two of us, just for a little while?'

Her face was suddenly soft and amazed. 'What a strange boy thou art.'

'Why? Are they no longer doing it?'

'Oh, yes . . .' She sat down again and folded her hands in her lap. Then she gave him a sharp glance. 'Thou art not fooling me, art thou?'

'Why?' He looked at her, troubled.

'All right. Here goes. Meeting.' She closed her eyes and bent her head.

He watched her. He did not know why she had made him feel like having meeting. It was as it had been that time with George on the horse: a great joy growing inside him until he wanted to shout.

He closed his eyes and folded his hands and thought, 'Goodbye, George. Thou wert my friend, I will never forget thee.' Then all became still within him.

* * *

'Well, John, how are we doing in there?'

Startled, John McHair turned away from the little barred window through which he had been gazing at the square of blue sky, all that was left to him of the woods, the animals, the wind in the treetops, the whispering rain at night. 'Aye?' he asked, blinded by the daylight, not recognising the man entering his cell.

'Thou must have been wondering why I let thee off so lightly.'

God's mercy! It was Justice Sawrey! 'Aye sir', he replied meekly, suddenly afraid. What did he want?

'Well, let me explain,' the little justice said affably. 'Thank you, Constable. I would like a word with the prisoner in private, please.'

The constable, huge and menacing, grumbled and went out, his boots rustling in the straw. He closed the iron-clad door behind him and disappeared. Justice Sawrey locked it with a key, which he put in his waistcoat pocket. There was something reassuring about him, and John McHair's apprehension lessened. He had never felt any hostility towards the little man; it made sense, in the world of the forest, that a captured marauder took his punishment without protest, it was part of life. The sentence he had received had indeed been lenient, considering that he had poached the man's own game.

'Thou knowest me well enough to realise that it is not my custom to go easy on proven criminals.'

No, Justice Sawrey had the reputation of being severe in his verdicts, almost vicious. 'Aye, sir,' he said.

'Thou must have realised that there was more to it, that there would be a condition. Hasn't thou?'

The fear came back. What was the man up to? 'Aye, sir,' he said.

'Well, it's very simple.' The justice opened up the seat-stick he carried and sat down, draping his cloak over it. 'I want to pick thy brains.'

''Scuse me, sir?' It sounded terrifying, he felt his cheeks go cold.

'To get from thee all thou knowest about trapping game. How to spot them, how to approach them, which snares to use . . . I gather that thou usest a club or a stick to brain the animals.'

'Aye, sir. Yes, sir, that's true . . .' He felt relieved.

'To be able to do that, you must approach them very closely. How the devil dost thou manage that?'

'Oh . . . well . . . it's — it's easy sir. I — er — I mean, it needs a lot of practice, but once you've got the knack of it, it's easy.'

'Well, tell me about it. How dost thou start? Where dost thou pick up the first scent of, say, a doe? Begin at the beginning.'

'Well, sir, I . . . I'm in the woods all the time, sir, so I always know where the animals are.'

'Nonsense! How canst thou possibly know where every animal is all the time? Now, don't start telling me fancy stories, man, because if thou art trying to pull the wool over my eyes . . .'

'No, sir! No, sir! I — I'm serious, sir! I mean it, I mean it!' He was profuse in his protests, for he wanted to do what the man asked as honestly as he could. 'See, sir, after you have lived in the woods for a while, I mean really lived, not just as a visitor, you realise that every animal has its daily run. A doe, as you say, will always be more or less in the same spot at a certain time, day or night. I mean sun time, sir, not clock time.'

'Why should an animal do that?'

'Well, sir, that's just the way it is, sir. Animals are like that. You can see it with a farmer's horse, sir. Once it has made a certain run a few times, it will find the way itself. I don't know why, sir, but that's the way it is, sir. Believe me, sir, I'm not telling you a story.'

'All right. I accept that. Then what?'

He could not understand it. Why did the judge want to know all this? Never mind why; he had better do as he was asked. He didn't mind talking about it; it was a poor substitute for freedom, but to talk about the woods and the animals aroused a deep, dormant craving within him. 'Well, sir, you see, sir, in order to trap an animal, you yourself have to become part of the forest. have your own run, so to speak. Every animal knows at all times where the others are; the moment there is a change in the routine,

they know there is something wrong. That's how the alert runs through the forest, sir. Even if you are as silent as a shadow, sir, and a little rabbit on its run sees you and hides, then five minutes later it is not in the place where it should have been, and the owl in the tree where it should have been knows that something is amiss and it will hoot, and the whole forest will know there's danger. What you have to do is make yourself part of the daily run, so they expect you at a certain hour in a certain spot. It takes a long time, sir, three or four months, before they accept you as part of their life, sir. But once they do that, they don't hide any more as long as you turn up in the same spot at the same time every day, every night. See, sir?'

The little judge looked at him through narrowed eyes. 'Fascinating,' he said. He put his hand in his waistcoat pocket, brought out a small silver box, put a pinch of snuff on the back of his hand and inhaled it. 'Go on.' He put the little box back in his pocket.

'Well, sir, once you have singled out a doe, you begin to draw a little closer each day to her run, without shying her, sir. The moment you are close enough to catch her eye — '

The judge sneezed, startling him. 'Excuse me. Thou wert saying?'

'Catch her eye, sir.'

'Then what?'

'Then, that's it, sir.'

'What does thou mean, that's it? Dost thou club it?'

'Oh, no, sir, no sir! Not for a long while yet! No, the moment you catch her eye, that's when it begins, sir.'

'What begins?' The judge peered at him like a squirrel.

'Well, you're a man, sir, and she's only a doe, and that's what you have to remember, sir. There comes a moment that the doe knows you are a man, and that you are going to kill her, and that you will come closer every day, until you are close enough to do it.'

'I've never heard such nonsense!' the judge exclaimed irritably. 'I told thee, don't give me any cock-and-bull stories!'

'I swear to you, sir, I swear to you, that's the way it's done, sir! That's the way I do it!' It seemed terribly important that he convince the man. How could he bring it home to him that this really was the way it happened?

'All right,' the judge said, relenting. 'Let's begin with the start of the day. Thou art in the forest. Right? Thou art waking up, right?'

'Aye, sir, aye, sir . . .'

'Tell me what happens. Where dost thou sleep? How dost thou wake up?'

'Well, sir, the last six months or so I have been sleeping er — in, er — in your park, sir, under a gorse bush on a little hillock south of the large meadow. You know where I mean?'

'By the track to the watering pond?'

'Aye, sir, aye, sir! That's where. Now, on your way to the watering pond, if you look to your right, sir, just where it turns for the last time, you will see three gorse bushes, two small and one large, in the shape of a dog, sir, a poodle . . .'

He went on and on, more detailed and vivid as he imagined himself back in that world where, until a week ago, he had ruled over all creatures that rustled, ran, flew and flitted in the forest. He savoured it, but it was like heady wine; finally, he was flushed with the freedom, the rapture of life itself.

The judge rose to leave, snapped shut his seat-stick and took the key from his pocket. 'Well, John, that was very instructive. But we have only scratched the surface,' he said. 'I want to know much more. I'll be back tomorrow night, then we can talk for as long as we like.' He went to the door, his buckled shoes glinting in the faint light of the window. He stuck the key in the lock; as he was about to open the door, he turned around. 'I want to know everything there is to know about poaching,' he said. 'If thou canst not teach me thy trade, I will have to think about correcting thy punishment.' On that ominous note, he left.

John gazed at the closed door, frowning, trying to think. Then he turned around and wandered back to the window, to breathe the clean air and stare at the patch of sky that suddenly looked infinitely precious, taunting. To talk about freedom had been wonderful while it lasted, but it left him restless and disturbed. It had undermined the only condition on which life in prison was possible: acceptance. He knew he could live through the next year locked up in this cage in perpetual twilight by turning himself into a dormant body of unstirring life, asleep, like the trees in the snow-covered forest. That's what he had done, settled down in hibernation. Now that somnolent sense of security was disturbed. To talk about the forest, to go over each day in such detail had stirred up an intense yearning, an anguish that was well-nigh unbearable.

He turned away from the window and started to walk, from door to wall, wall to door, door to wall. It was suicide for a hibernating animal to stir before the spring. A tree that was tricked into budding prematurely by a freakish warm spell was bound to suffer terribly. Suddenly he found himself wishing that the judge would not come back.

His restlessness grew worse when, later, it started to rain outside. He stood with his back to the wall underneath the little window, grey now with low-hanging cloud, and listened to the whispering rain. Voices, small voices, whispering. 'Come, John, come, John. come, John.'

Oh, Jesus God! He panicked. He began to pace up and down again, faster, faster, he broke into a run, bouncing himself off the wall and the door at every turn; in the end, he crashed into the straw, weak with giddiness. This was insane, he had only a year to go, by breaking prison he would condemn himself to the life of a fugitive for the rest of his days; he would never be really free again, never live happily among the animals again in his glens, his fells, his woods. He would forever be afraid of men; his happiness, his very zest for life would be hollowed out by the knowledge that, in the end, he was bound to be captured. No! Whatever he did, he must not let himself fall under the spell of that dream of freedom, for it was death. 'Jesus God,' he prayed, 'tell that man to leave me alone!'

Outside the little window the rain went on whispering his name.

* * *

From her bedchamber Margaret Fell watched the rain. It came down steadily, monotonously; it might last for days, maybe weeks. It seemed to add to the bleakness in which she had awakened that morning after her first night home. At first it had seemed to be just a reaction, an understandable weariness after the emotions of the past week. But now, with the rain, it seemed to have settled down, like autumn itself. It always started like this: rain, rain, rain, rain, days, nights, weeks of it; then the sky would be swept clean by a gale, become green and bright and cold, and the leaves would fall, and the fells turn dark and the gales of winter come howling across the ocean. After that, life would be frozen solid for months, even the daylight would freeze until, at dead of winter, the day would be no more than a melancholy dusk; if there were clouds, life would be lived by candlelight all day. She

did not know why, but this year she could not face it. The very thought that from now on it would get darker and darker, drearier and drearier, bleaker and bleaker . . . She should turn away from that window, occupy herself with the household, but a weary lassitude kept her where she was, gazing out at the rain.

Why this sense of emptiness, listlessness? Was it the thought that it would be two months before Thomas came back? Of course not; she might as well confess it to herself. It was George. She had foreseen that life without him would seem bleak for a while; she had not foreseen that it would hit her this hard. It now seemed as if his mere presence had sharpened the keenness of her senses, enhanced her enjoyment of life. Never had a summer seemed richer, the colours of the garden and the sky more vivid; never before had she felt she could carry with ease not only her household and the estate but all the woes of the world with a feeling of effortless power, the way a bird must feel as it soared in the sky.

That was it: now he was gone, she felt locked up, trapped. For a moment she felt the mad impulse to order her carriage and go after him, become one of his travelling followers until she was strong enough to stand on her own feet. For a moment the idea seemed glorious, it filled her with a rush of hope and eagerness, with life. But she smiled wryly at the rain. Imagine! Her children, the servants, the household, the whole estate depended on her. She had always accepted that without giving it a second thought; it was her life, the purpose for which she lived. Now the fact that she was essential to the well-being of so many people filled her with rebellion. She could not desert them, much as she might yearn to; she was caught. She had solicited their fealty. She had purposely made them dependent on her; it had seemed the only way to fill her life with meaning, especially during the months when Thomas was away. Now, here she was: shackled by her own chains. Oh, that rain! If only she could go riding on the fells; their vast solitude always seemed to replenish her vigour. But riding in the rain was unspeakably dreary. She could smell her cloak getting soaked; she could feel the cold drops wriggle down her back as they always did, however tightly she bundled up. And what was there to look at she had not seen a thousand times? For God's sake! She had to snap out of this before she went crazy with her own morbid gloom!

She walked to the door and suddenly saw him walk away again, down that corridor in the castle. The thought that he

might never return gave her a qualm of panic. It could not be! It was impossible! She would be unable to bear it! Was it because of her that he had left? Again she asked herself that question. Maybe she had indeed brought this upon herself, by the way she had run after him like a beheaded chicken. If she had given him the impression that she was just another of those females who went running after him, shrieking, the moment he tried to get away, then chances were she would never set eyes on him again. God only knew what drove that crazy man. That was the one condition for his returning: he would do so only if told to do so by God. How? How could she prevail upon God to do so? How would he know it was God? Did he hear His voice? '*Be still, allow that of God to rise within thee and to guide thy thoughts.*' What exactly was it that rose within him and guided his thoughts? What *was* 'that of God'? All summer long she had bandied those words about, convinced that their meaning was absolutely clear to her; now she discovered that she did not have the foggiest idea. "*Part of thee, yet not thine.*" "*I see, like my stomach, Priest Lampitt's belly.*" "*No, like thy unborn children.*" How outraged she had been! To say a thing like that to a woman, a lady, whom he had met only minutes before . . . She wished she had asked him to explain himself more fully. That of God. What was it? An invention of his? A fact? There had been moments during meeting, though not nearly as many as she had tried to make herself believe, when she had felt something rise within her, something indefinable that had indeed guided her thoughts. But was it God? George Fox said so. Damn George Fox. Damn, damn, damn George Fox! Damn!

But her methodical mind forced her to probe further. Whenever that of God was in his case, it obviously responded to stimuli from the outside, as when he had shouted 'Stop!' at the executioners about to hang that girl in Derby jail, or when he had decided to go and meet Cromwell at her husband's instigation. How could she make that of God in him whisper, *George, go back to Swarthmoor?* That was what God would have to say: *Go back, George, go back to thy helpless children, abandoned by their father!*

Father. Maybe that was the key. Young as he was, he was their spiritual father, it was his duty to return to his children when he heard them cry in anguish and fear. Father. He was a wayward father.

An hour later she was sitting at the table in the big hall, paper

and ink before her, surrounded by all the members of her family and her household, whom she had summoned. 'Friends,' she said, 'I called you because we are going to send a letter to George Fox. We must prevail upon him to return, before he gets to London.'

Instead of the joyful enthusiasm she had expected, all they did was nod or grunt dispiritedly. Only Mabby cried, 'Oh, yes, ma'am, I mean Margaret, yes, ma'am! Yes, Margaret! Oh, please, *please* make him come back!'

She eyed the child coldly. 'This is not because of his person,' she said. 'It is because we are not yet steadfast in the faith. We are in need of more guidance. The moment he has given that to us and turned us from — from whatever it is we are now into true, Children of the Light, he will be free to go wherever he pleases. So, if any of you have any suggestions, I'll be happy to include them. This is a draft of what I propose we write.'

Nobody spoke.

'*Our dear father in the Lord,*' she read, '*for though we have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet we have only one father, for thou has begotten us through the gospel, eternal praise be to our Lord. We, thy babes, gathered together in the power of the spirit, do thirst and languish after thee, and challenge the right that we have in thee.*'

As she read, she felt a growing certainty. This was it; he would be unable to resist this call. He might even have left them for a while on purpose. He might at this very moment be waiting for the confirmation that the change he had brought about in them had been a true one, not a passing fancy. Well, she had told him in terms that would leave no doubt.

'*Oh, thou bread of life, without which our souls will starve! Oh, give us thy bread and take pity on us, whom thou hast nursed up with the breasts of consolation! Our only desire is to see thee again, that we may be refreshed and established, and have life more abundantly. Do not let the beastly powers which keep us in bondage separate thy bodily presence from us; we would rejoice to see thy kingly power triumph over them. Oh, our dear nursing father, we hope thou wilt not leave us comfortless but wilt come again; though sorrow be for a time, let joy come in the morning! Oh, our life, we hope to see thee again, that our joy may be full! For in thy presence is fullness of joy, and where thou dwellest is pleasure forevermore.*'

As she looked about her at their faces, she saw that she had

begun to speak for them. She resumed her reading with confidence. *'Oh, thou fountain of eternal life, our souls thirst after thee! For in thee alone is our life and peace; without thee we have no peace! Our souls are refreshed by seeing thee, and our life is preserved by thee, oh, thou father of eternal felicity . . .'*

She was suddenly filled again with a burning ardour for God and His truth. She felt that, should it ever be demanded of her, she would lay down her life for God. She thought of adding this, but decided against it. This was too personal. The letter had to be signed by them all to be effective.

She did so first, then Thomas Woodhouse, Ann Traylor, Henderson, Will Caton; the rest of the servants merely made a cross. The children each added a postscript at her prompting; Mary was allowed to make a print with her little hand. She wrote on her behalf: *'Oh, my dear father, when wilt thou come?'* The only one missing was young George. She was sure he had been there; as she looked up, she saw him slink out surreptitiously. The little monkey! She was about to call him back, but decided this was enough. George Fox must be aware of the boy's feelings towards him; to find him pleading for his return as his spiritual father might cause a frown. 'You may go,' she said. 'Except thee, Thomas.'

Dutifully, Thomas Woodhouse stayed behind while the others trooped out with some alacrity. Obviously, they were freshened by hope and eager to get back to their tasks. 'Here,' she said, sealing the letter, 'take this to the posthouse thyself. Make certain it will leave on the night coach. And pre-pay the charge; he may be temporarily out of funds.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Only after he had gone did it occur to her that he had dropped the 'Margaret' again. Well, it would all come back the moment George returned. She was absolutely certain he would and felt full of zest and determination again. He would come back, some instinct told her so. Or maybe it was not instinct but indeed that of God. Perhaps this way she would discover what it was at last.

'Ann!' she called, as she saw the girl flit past on the landing above her. 'Where art thou going?'

The little hoyden stopped in her tracks and looked down. With those green cat's eyes and that flaming red hair she was a handsome baggage, but much too pert for her station. A brief return to normalcy would do her no harm at all.

'I'm on my way to see Bonny Baker, ma'am.'

Bonny Baker! She had left him out! She should have thought of him; George felt guilty about him, of that she was certain. 'What is thy business with Bonny Baker?'

'I am teaching him to read and write while he has to keep to his bed. He has nothing else to do.'

'Very charitable. But not now. I want the summer curtains in the children's rooms taken down. We haven't sorted their winter clothes yet. They will have to be aired, to get rid of the camphor.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'There is plenty to do before we set out on mission of Christian charity. Start with the curtains.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Ah! What joy, to be alive again! She ran up the stairs, two steps at a time. In the passage between the children's rooms Ann Traylor's ghost evaporated. Bonny Baker, indeed! She would have cook send him a dish of calf's-foot jelly. And a picture-book. She might even go to see him herself, one of these nights. He was, after all, a member of the Swarthmoor Meeting.

With gratitude she felt the loving-kindness that had blessed her in the early days of her convincement return to her. She felt full of tenderness again, even towards spiders. She went to her room to look for one, to set it free in the rain.

* * *

There he was, at last! John McHair sprang to his feet, rushed to the door and pressed his head against the bars of the little window, trying to peer into the corridor, listening breathlessly. The candle flame in the lantern outside the door danced and smoked; the shadows of its little cage twitched on the wall. Water dripped somewhere, melodious in the silence. But there were no footsteps. No light came swinging down the passage. He was not coming. He was not coming!

Moaning, he turned around and started his lonely pendulum walk again, from door to wall, wall to door, door to wall. How utterly bewildering it all was to a man who wished no more than to be left in peace! He wanted no more from life for the next year than the somnolent security of hibernation; if only the damned judge had left him alone instead of arousing in him that unbearable yearning for freedom, for life! Why was he being treated this way? What did the judge really want of him? Why had he come back every single night now for over a week, to sit there on his

seat-stick, probing, asking questions, making him go through every minute of every day, over and over and over again, until his head was spinning and his throat dry and his eyes burned with desperation? He had become dependent on the man's visits like a drunkard on his daily tankards of ale, and now, suddenly he stayed away. Why? Why?

Crazily, he tried to talk to himself, the way he had talked to the judge, to say aloud the things that haunted him, the yearnings that had been stirred up by those questions. But without the judge he was nothing but a jabbering fool.

He could not stand it! He could not stand being cooped up here any longer! His senses had been awakened to the world outside once more; he could not bear the captivity! He must get out, he must! He still knew that it made no sense; but something inside him, some instinct, had turned upon itself. It compelled him to nurture the mad dream of knocking down the judge, grabbing the key from his pocket, opening the door and bursting into the boundless space of freedom. During the evenings the judge was the only man around the prison; he had said so himself. He had brandished that key every night. And now, God damn him, he stayed away. Maybe he would never come back. Maybe he had done all this on purpose, just to make him suffer, like a chained dog, for eleven interminable months! Oh, Jesus God! He could not stand it! He could not stand it!

Faster and faster he paced, up and down his cell. He broke into a run, bounced off the wall at every turn. In the end, exhausted, giddy, he crashed into the straw once more.

While still roaming the sunlit fells, the dappled woods, he had never realised that the condition of all living things in the magic forest, except himself, was a permanent state of terror. It was the state in which he now lay there, groaning, in the straw, in the stench of his own excrement. This was hell, anything was better than this, anything, anything. Hush! Was that him . . .?

Again he leaped to his feet, rushed to the door, peered through the little window, listened, his heart pounding in his throat.

But there was nothing, only the dancing shadows, the dripping water, softly singing his name.

* * *

The two letters, one from Judge Fell, one from his wife, reached George Fox at the same time. Farmers and labourers from all around were gathering in the muddy yard of the house; before

meeting started he wanted to read them in privacy. He took them with him to the haystack where he was to sleep that night.

He opened the one from Margaret Fell first, and read it slowly. Fleeting patches of sunlight chased the shadows of clouds across the fields as he sat reading, his white hat by his side, his hair whisked about in the wind that swept down from the fells and across the fields, where the wheat billowed like the sea.

He had received a goodly number of rapturous letters from women over the years, never one so passionate and at the same time oddly innocent as this one. He had come to know her well during the weeks they had spent in proximity; this letter was just like her: strong, impetuous, generous and tender, with a startling frankness. He gazed at the wild chase of light and shadow on the wind-swept wheat; from the courtyard came the whinnying of horses, restless with the turmoil in the air; high overhead, screeching thinly, a flock of seagulls was blown about the sky.

Her letter, he thought, could never have been written by a woman of humble origins. Her very exuberance of expression had something imperious about it, a contempt for what other people might think that belied the very thing she wished to convey: her utter dependence on his spiritual guidance. Margaret Fell would never be dependent on any man; the beguiling thing was that she herself had no idea of this. As far as she knew, she could not live another day without him, spiritual father, guide, shepherd, bread of life, breasts of consolation, whatever else she had called him in her determination to have him come back at once. He had always thought of true feminality as dependence on a sovereign male, yet she was the most feminine woman he had ever met. No one had ever filled him with such admiration and irritation, such delight and exasperation. Did she also excite him carnally?

He did not evade the question, he had long since found peace with his natural self and accepted it. If God had furnished him with an instinctive response to women like every other man's, there could be no basic evil in it; the evil began when the law was broken, if only in his heart. To suppress his awareness of Margaret Fell as a woman would imply that he was unable to refrain from breaking the law unless he went through life with his eyes and his ears closed. Margaret Fell attracted him greatly. She had done so from the beginning. But the essential element she generated within him was joy, making other women seem joyless in comparison, especially in spiritual ecstasy.

He read her letter again. The passionate lines, like herself, radiated joy, despite the plea they intended to convey. How he would love to heed her bidding and turn around right now, head back for those treacherous sands he had crossed in God's power, that sombre house aflutter with children in white dresses, the excitement of her presence, the fullness of their meetings for worship. But there was the other letter.

He knew what it contained before he broke the seal. It was indeed an introduction to a Lord Shorwell, who was requested to take him forthwith to Oliver Cromwell. It was exactly what Judge Fell had promised, yet it filled him with dismay. The cautiously worded, dispassionate letter seemed cold, calculating. Reading it made him feel tainted with lovelessness, a pawn in a game, a symbol, not a man. Suddenly he was no longer sure of God's intention. The way that had seemed to open with the first mention of this letter on the way to Lancaster seemed to close again. He had no clear leading as to what he should do next. All he could do was wait upon the Lord.

He rose and went to join the crowd in the farmyard, putting the letters in his coat pocket as he went. The crowd was small, which was no wonder considering the blustering weather; they were nearly blown off their feet, especially the women, whose voluminous skirts, ballooning in the wind, tugged behind them. The meeting turned out to be entirely silent; no one could have made himself heard above the whistling and hooting of the wind. It was one of those rare meetings that seemed dull and dead. That was the only drawback of spontaneity: on rare occasions the Presence did not manifest itself and the expectant crowd was gradually reduced to a haphazard group of people waiting for something that never materialised. Maybe the letters prevented him from centering down; he found he could not banish them from his thoughts, especially hers. Its passionate lines went spiralling through his mind like the dust whisked about the yard by the wind.

After meeting broke, a number of people came to talk to him, mainly women. It seemed as if the demands on him would never end; but finally the last one, a voluble widow, released him and he fled into the hayrick, where he supped on cheese and ale. The wind died down at sunset and the rain started. He listened to its gushing, secure in his dry little shelter of light and warmth. After he had blown out the lantern, he lay on his back in the darkness, thinking of her. Suddenly he knew: Beware. Thy self-assurance

may prove hollow, should she ever be allowed to assail it. She is tempestuous, and noble — that may be thy downfall. Despite thy sincere desire to see in people only that of God, thou art pleased that letter was written by the wife of a Lord Chief Justice. From this even the armour of God will not protect thee, for the devil is within. He can do no harm as long as thou knowest where he is at all times and exposest him to the light when he attacks thee. But to consciously go and challenge the devil in *her* would bring about that the two would fuse, as surely as that of God in thee fused with that of God in the hangmen in Derby. As it did then, it would unleash the ocean, only this time not the ocean of light and love, but that of death and darkness. So — away with thee! Away to London!

It pained him, for the moment all this was in the open his body and his heart ached for her, ferociously. But he began to formulate in his mind the letter that he would send her on the morrow. A loving letter; yet it should leave no doubt. Away, away — London was safer, despite the plague.

* * *

Yes! There he was! This time there he was! At last!

John McHair saw the light of the lantern approach, heard the footsteps echoing in the corridor. The key tinkled, scraped in the lock; the door squeaked open and there stood Judge Sawrey, the light from the lantern on his legs. He closed the door, put the key in his waistcoat pocket — the moment had come. John McHair found himself praying to God, the God of the Quakers. 'God, God of Fox, help me, help me . . .'

The judge put the lantern on the floor, opened his seat-stick, sat down and said, 'Well, friend John, I thought I'd come to see thee one more time. Tomorrow I am leaving for a long journey.'

Yes! This was the moment, the last moment! He stretched out his hand. 'Give me the key,' he said hoarsely.

An odd look crossed the judge's face. 'My good man, thou must be mad! Is this my reward for coming to see thee in thy affliction?'

Something about those words seemed to convey a warning; but it had been too long. With a bellow of despair he threw himself upon the judge, knocked him down, ripped his waistcoat as he pulled out the key, sprang to the door, stabbed the key into the lock, pulled it open. For one moment he thought he was free;

then he saw the constable and three men waiting outside, their swords drawn. He threw himself upon them, roaring.

He fought for his life; it took a long time before, finally, he was overpowered and dragged back into his cell. He heard the constable ask, 'Are you hurt, sir?' and the judge answer, 'No, I'm not. Are you men all right?' Then the constable asked, 'What shall we do to him?'

Somebody kicked him, and he opened his eyes. There, looking down on him, was the judge.

'That was very foolish of thee, John,' he said. 'With the powers invested in me I can now order thy execution for assault and jailbreak. But because of the detailed information thou hast given me these past weeks, I will show mercy.' He smiled. Somehow, that smile was terrifying.

John stammered, 'No, no . . .' in the sudden knowledge that whatever was about to happen would be worse than death.

'These men have been witnesses to thy assault upon my person,' the judge continued. 'They would kill thee; I want them to understand the reason for my mercy.' He turned to the constable. 'For striking me with his right hand in an effort to escape, cut it off by the wrist.'

He screamed in horror; he fought like a demon, he nearly managed to throw off the men who clung to him with the tenacity of hounds bringing down a stag. But they threw him on his back on the floor, pinned his arms down by kneeling on them; a sword flashed in the lantern light and, shrieking, he felt his wrist being severed.

He fell into darkness, worse than death; the men did something to the stump; had he known it was to prevent his bleeding to death, he would have torn off the bandage. 'God, God, Quaker God,' he whispered, 'mercy . . . mercy . . .'

But, like the dying fawn, the broken hare, he received no answer from the great indifference.

* * *

Margaret Fell was the first to hear the postman's horn because she had been waiting for it every day. She rushed to the window and saw him cantering towards the house on his pony, his yellow-and-green uniform bobbing among the bracken brown with autumn; sunlight sparked in his horn. She had to force herself to stay where she was, not to run downstairs.

He was entering the gate now, on his way to the kitchen door,

where Thomas Woodhouse or anyone else around would take the letter and — oh, no! It might be addressed to all of them, considering that all of them had signed hers! They might tear it open without waiting for her! She ran out of the room and swept into the kitchen just as the postman appeared at the door.

'Good morning, Mistress Fell! I have a letter for you from, let me see, Yorkshire way.'

What business was it of his? 'Thank thee, Master Floris.' She took the letter, said to Thomas Woodhouse, 'Pay our friend his due,' and walked out of the kitchen. In the hall she broke into a run, stormed up the stairs, ran into her bedchamber, slammed the door and, leaning with her back against it, broke the seal. The paper shook in her hands.

'Dear and tender and loving sister in the Truth of God. My tender love in the Truth of God to thee and all the rest of thy family in the Truth. Walk in the Truth of God, and in that which keeps you pure to God; and the everlasting God of power and Truth keep you to Himself in His Truth to Whom be praises and glory forever. The Lord doth show much of His Love and His power here amongst us, to Him be praise forever, to the confounding of the deceit for the simple One's sake and making His power known and thy words are fulfilled. I can say little of coming over. Thy loving friend, G.F.'

She gazed at the letter, stunned. Then she read it again, certain she must have misunderstood. His language was not easy; there were so many 'truths' in it and one line did not seem to make sense. But when she returned to the casual little sentence at the end, it penetrated to her at last. He was not coming. That was what the letter said: I am not coming. The rest was pious balderdash.

She was overwhelmed by a terrible, heartbreaking grief. No! It was not true! She should read it again, slowly and lovingly, trying to hear his voice as she read. *'Dear and tender and loving sister in the Truth of God ...'* Well now, wasn't that exactly what it said: dear and tender and loving? Didn't he call her 'sister', wasn't 'in the Truth of God' just one of those phrases he always used, dear boy? Of course it was. Just because she was disappointed that he was not coming straightaway, there was no point in overlooking his shy and tender declaration of — what? *'My tender love in the Truth of God to thee and all the rest of thy family in the Truth ...'* There: he sent his tender love to her, and of course he mentioned the rest of the family, she had made

them all sign the letter ... Oh! What was the point of fooling herself? He was not coming! Those words were just a mealy-mouthed, cowardly effort to — no, no! She should not allow herself to think like that! She must read on, without that terrible disappointment distorting every word!

'Walk in the Truth of God, and in that which keeps you pure to God; and the everlasting God of power and Truth keep you to Himself in His Truth — 'Balderdash! Bloody, boring balderdash! She felt tears running down her face as she shook the letter with both fists. She tried to suppress her rage; it was the fury of a child who had always had her own way.

He was not coming. It was obvious why not: '*The Lord doth show much of His love and His power here amongst us.*' He was off and running again, stirring people up, filling them with passion and light, saving their souls and wrecking their lives. '*To Him be praise forever, to the confounding of the deceit for the simple One's sake and making His power known and thy words are fulfilled.*' Now, what the devil did that mean? 'The confounding of the deceit for the simple One's sake' obviously was a fancy way of saying, 'I'm ripping up another church and goading its minister to make his congregation realise that he is a fake and a windbag, whose God is in his belly — ' No, whose God *is* his belly.

She sat down at her dresser and rested her head in her hands, overcome by nausea and giddiness. She took a deep breath in an effort to get the weight off her chest; when she opened her eyes, she was met by the stare of a haggard woman looking like a beaten dog. Was this what 'walking in the Truth of God' had done to her? Of course not. It had nothing to do with God. It had to do with a thirty-eight-year-old woman and a twenty-eight-year-old youth.

She tried to brush the thought aside, but she had better face the truth. She had fallen in love with a youth ten years younger than she, after twenty years of marriage and seven children. She was not the first to whom this had happened; it must, God knew, be common enough: the subject of countless tales of gossip among women cooped up in their manor houses all over the countryside, tittering and giggling behind their fans.

So, she was a woman scorned. At last proud Maggie had made a fool of herself. It had been innocence, embarrassing inexperience. She had been cooped up all her life; despite her seven children, her true passion had never been aroused because it had

never been challenged by anyone other than her urbane, courteous husband. Who would have dared trifle with the wife of Justice Fell? It had taken a revolution, the disruption of the church, the murder of a king to produce a male who dared break into the castle and awaken the sleeping beauty. A nobody, a weaver's son who had refused to recognise established power, rank and authority. In a way, he had been as innocent as she; his impudence had presented itself to him as prophetic fervour, eagerness to obey the will of God. '*Let us kneel together and ask the Lord why He brought me to Swarthmoor Hall.*' How innocent, how self-confidently chaste! And she had been as innocent, as chaste ... But what about the way she had thought of him after her passionate reunion with her husband on his return?

Oh! How sordid! She hid her face in her hands. She could not accept it, she could not. 'Oh, George, George!' she whispered into her cupped hands, secretly, as if the speaking of his name would make it a consummated sin. But it was no sin! She had not known what she was doing, neither had he, she was certain of it! Poor boy, he must have been filled with alarm by her letter. No wonder he had replied with this jabbering little note, in which the word 'truth' was brandished six times, like a frying pan at a charging cow!

She suddenly burst into giggles. She had a fair idea of her own power once she cut loose; he must have run for his life, backwards. '*To the confounding of the deceit for the simple One's sake and making His power known and thy words are fulfilled.*' Incoherent goosegobble from a thoroughly rattled swain who had provoked more than he had bargained for. '*I can say little of coming over.*' Well, dear boy, if I were in thy shoes and given the choice between going to see Oliver Cromwell or a reproachful old woman ...

'Oh, George, George!' Her fragile composure caved in; she sobbed, her head on her arms, among the bottles, the potions, the pathetic paraphernalia with which she had tried to cling to youth. 'God, have mercy on me! Save me, save me ...!' But she had lost God. All her life she had been happy with the fatherly God of daily prayers and Sunday sermon, then George had brought her a new One, a living One, radiant with love, only to—

She became aware that someone was knocking on her door. She wanted to cry 'Go away!' but that would set the household buzzing. She hastily dried her eyes. slapped some powder on her

tear-streaked face, brushed her hair back; then she took up a comb and started to arrange it. 'Come in!'

The door squeaked. 'Shall I make the bed?'

'Yes, Mabby, of course.'

She was aware of the fascinated interest of the silly little thing, who started to rummage behind her. At least it was not Henderson or Anny Traylor. Even if Mabby did sense something amiss, she was too stupid to put her finger on it.

'Was that a letter from George Fox, ma'am?'

'Letter? Oh, yes. A letter from Mr. Fox. Indeed.'

'I wonder if he knows about John McHair.'

'John McHair?' She tried to bite back the tears as she was suddenly overwhelmed by the emptiness of the life she was condemned to live from now on.

'Didn't you know? Justice Sawrey had his hand lopped off.'

'*What* didst thou say?'

Mabby stood, flushed and beaming, behind the bed. 'Justice Sawrey had John McHair's hand lopped off!'

'Who said so?'

'The constable told Will Hartford this morning at the smithy.'

'Why, for God's sake?!'

'I don't know, ma'am.' She sounded alarmed by the vehemence she had provoked. 'I think he tried to escape . . .'

Margaret stared at the child; then she said, 'Go and tell Thomas Woodhouse to come here at once!' That poor, inarticulate man who had sat opposite her in meeting with such a bewildered, mournful face! What a monstrous thing to do! She must go and see him at once. She could not just let him lie there in that dirty prison cell, she must do something . . .

Thomas Woodhouse arrived.

'Thomas! Is it true about John McHair?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so.'

'Did they — did he lose his hand?'

'He did.'

'How *is* he? Hast thou any idea?'

'No — all I know is what they did to him.'

'Very well, tell Will Hartford to bring out the two-in-hand, ask Henderson to get from the cellar the jar of Morocco plums I bought a while ago, tell Ann Traylor to get ready to come with me. I am going to the prison.'

His face went blank with amazement. 'Prison?' Then he

recovered. 'No, Margaret Fell! That is out of the question! If thou wishest John McHair to have those plums, I'll take them to him; for thee to go is not possible!'

'Why not?'

'Prison is no place for a woman, not even if she were to go there as an act of charity.'

'Charity?' she cried. 'A man who sat with us in meeting, who set our own Bonny Baker's leg? For me to go to him in concern after he has been wilfully mutilated, thou callest *charity*?'

Thomas Woodhouse looked at her with dignity. 'Margaret,' he said, 'I maintain: thou must not go there thyself. No woman should go. For one thing, thou wouldst not be allowed to see him.'

'Oh, all right, then. What about a man bringing a letter? Surely they will admit a man. Or a boy? How about Harry Martin?'

Thomas Woodhouse shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know,' he said. 'In that case, Bonny Baker would be better.'

'Why? He is still as feeble as a reed!'

'If thou art planning to send John McHair a letter, someone will have to read it to him. Harry Martin can't read either.'

'All right. Tell Bonny Baker to come and fetch the letter in a few minutes. Or Ann Traylor.'

After Thomas Woodhouse left she sat down at her dresser, pushed aside the bottles and jars and wrote: '*Dear John McHair.*' That sounded impersonal. Dear John? Too familiar. *Dear and Tender and Loving Brother in the Truth of God. My tenderest love to thee in thy cruel affliction. I cannot tell thee how my heart goes out to thee. What must hurt thee most, I know, is the thought that he for whose sake thou art now tormented has deserted thee and left thee to rot in loneliness and despair . . .*'

Her pen raced across the paper. Blurting out all her misery, loneliness and despair, she wrote to the illiterate poacher as she would have written to a sister. Only when she was done did it occur to her that John McHair would find it completely bewildering. He was in a prison not because he was a Quaker, but a poacher. He was mourning the loss not of George Fox, but of his hand.

As she sat there in doubt, she became aware that she was not alone. She turned and found Ann Traylor standing behind her, looking at her with knowledgeable eyes. All she could do was fold the letter, hand it to her and say, 'Give this to Bonny Baker and

tell him to deliver it to John McHair in person. Did Henderson get that jar of plums out of the cellar?'

'Yes.' Ann Traylor took the letter.

The image of the poor man lying there with only a stump where his hand had been was harrowing. There must be something else she could give him, other than those plums and that incoherent letter. Something that would convey to him her identification with his suffering. He was in a dungeon underneath the courthouse. It must be dark and damp and cold. Some candles? Something to combat the dampness? What about that pair of mittens sent to her husband by Aunt Agatha for his last birthday? 'Just a moment,' she said, and went to look for them in his chest of drawers.

There they were: just the kind of thing a maidenly aunt with failing eyesight would knit for her nephew during lonely winter evenings. But they were right for John McHair. Only as she was about to give them to Ann did she realise that, instead of conveying identification, they would stress to what extent the poor man had been a pretext for her letter. He needed only one mitten now, not a pair. What she should do was to send him one mitten and something else to put over his stump, which must be cold and very tender. A sock? It would serve, but seemed depressing. Wait! Another of Aunt Agatha's stained-glass offerings: a bonnet for Mary when she was a baby. 'Ann, that little red bonnet my husband's aunt knitted for Mary some years ago — where did we put it?'

'In Mary's chest, with her doll's clothes.'

'Get it. It's just the thing to go with this mitten for John McHair.'

The girl looked at her quizzically.

'I am making up a parcel for him, and I want to put in these mittens, but he has only one hand now. The bonnet would be just the thing for his stump.'

'What about the tassel?'

'Oh, we can cut that off. But why should we? Leave it on! It may look a little foolish, but why not? He's not dead! I don't want to commiserate with him; I want him to feel hopeful. Yes! We must somehow cheer up that man cast out in darkness. As a child, what I liked best about Christmas was the silly presents. the gewgaws in my stocking. Let's get a box and put in lots of things, nonsense things — here . . .' She went back to her husband's chest of drawers. 'Some underclothing. And here: some

gay kerchiefs to blow his nose in, or just to look at. Does he smoke tobacco?'

'I don't know.'

'He's probably not allowed to smoke in prison. Would he be allowed to make tea? No, of course not. I know!' She went to her dresser. 'Some toilet water. I know it is not meant for a man, but I am sure he would love to smell something nice right now. Hold out thy apron, let's put it all in there. Now, what else can we give him? Canst thou think of anything?'

The girl looked at her with a faint smile. There was no way of knowing whether it expressed condescension or amusement, and she did not care. She had a life to live, a house to run, children to shelter, even though George had taken with him all her joy, her hope, even her God.

* * *

Boniface Baker was resting on his cot in the loft when suddenly Ann came in, early for once, and handed him a folded piece of paper. 'Here,' she said, 'read this aloud.'

'What is it?'

'Never mind, read it. Loudly and clearly.'

'But why? What *is* it?'

She sighed. 'Oh, wilt thou do as I say? Open that letter and read it aloud to me! If thou canst not do it properly, they'll have to send someone else.'

'Ann,' he said quietly, 'I want to know why.'

As she had begun to do of late, she sighed and gave in. 'Oh, all right! It's a letter Mistress Fell has written to John McHair, in prison. She wants thee to take it to him; he cannot read, and thou wilt have to read it to him. So, go ahead and let me hear if thou canst do that.'

'But I can't walk all that way!'

'Thou art not going to walk! Thou art going to be taken there in the coach-and-pair, and I'll come with thee to see to it that thou dost not fall on thy snoot. So, read! They are screaming for thee downstairs.'

He unfolded the letter and read, '*Dear and Tender and Loving Brother in the Truth of God. My tenderest love to thee in thy cruel af-af-. . .*'

'Affliction.'

'What is that?'

'Never mind! Say it: affliction. Affliction.'

'. . . affliction. I cannot tell thee how my heart goes out to thee. What must hurt . . .'

The door to the loft was thrown open rudely and a voice hollered, 'Bonny! Where the devil—' It was Will Hartford, big and angry, stooping under the eaves. 'What art thou doing here?'

'Art thou by any chance addressing me?' Ann retorted.

'Who else? Come on, boy! I'm waiting!'

'He will be ready in a moment, once I have made sure he can fulfill his mission.'

'Ah, da-dee-da . . .!' Will mimicked her unpleasantly. 'I'm so sorry, ma'am! Forgive me for intruding, ma'am! Make sure his britches are buttoned, ma'am, before he—' He ducked as a book came fluttering at his head.

'Get out!' Ann screamed with skin-tingling fury. 'Get out, thou foul-mouthed bully!'

'La-dee-da!' Will taunted, behind the closed door. 'I'll go and tell the steward that His Lordship isn't garbed yet, but will descend anon.'

'Do that!' she screamed. 'And then drown thyself!'

'Ann,' Bonny said soothingly. 'Don't be angry. It's just his way.'

'He's a brute! A vile brute!' She spat, chest heaving.

'Hand me my breeches.'

She threw them at him. 'Now, don't let thyself be bullied into going if thy leg hurts on the stairs. Dost thou hear me?'

'I hear thee.'

Standing up, his leg hurt. He put his foot down gingerly and tried his weight on it.

'Well?' Suddenly, there she was, her arm around him.

'I think I'm all right. Let me try . . .'

'Now, take it easy, Bonny, take it easy! If it hurts on those stairs, tell me honestly. I'd rather go myself than let them use thee this way. Religion!'

'Hush,' he said. 'Let me try by myself.'

Painfully he hobbled towards the door. As he started down the narrow steps, Ann hovered over him like an anxious mother hen. At the bottom of the stairs Will Hartford was waiting.

'Well, well, there's His Lordship!'

'Hold thy tongue, thou big oaf! How is it, Bonny? Dost thou think—'

Never mind what he thinks, let's go!' Will Hartford took him

by the shoulder. He winced; before he knew what was happening, Ann was upon the man, claws out.

'Don't touch him!' she shrieked. 'If thou touchest that boy, I'll scratch thy eyes out!'

'All right, all right . . .' Will Hartford, despite his size, backed away from Ann's fury. Outside the stables, the coach-and-pair was waiting. Ann helped him up and was climbing in beside him when suddenly Thomas Woodhouse was there. 'What dost thou think thou art doing?'

'I am going to accompany him to the prison,' she said defiantly.

'Come out of there!'

'Mr. Woodhouse. I happen to be the governess in this house, not a maid. I am not under thy orders.'

'Oh, yes, thou art. Come out of there. I will not have any woman from this house turn up at the prison, I don't care who she is.'

'I am not taking any orders from thee!'

'No nonsense,' Thomas Woodhouse said, holding out his hand. 'I would not allow Mistress Fell to go and I'm not going to take any arguments from thee. Come out of there.'

For once, she obeyed. The mention of Mistress Fell had done it. It seemed incredible, but at that moment Mr. Woodhouse looked as if he had indeed told Mistress Fell to come out of there and been obeyed.

'Hartford, accompany the boy and see to it that he comes to no harm.'

'Aye,' answered the man, climbing up into the driver's seat. 'I'll keep an eye on him from up here.'

The leather seat was very soft; Bonny's thigh hurt when he sank into it farther than he had expected. He winced.

'Bonny!' Ann looked at him anxiously through the open door. 'Art thou sure—'

'Oh, come away, lass!' Mr. Woodhouse cried impatiently. 'The boy's going to be all right! Come on!' He slammed the door.

Bonny heard Will Hartford clack his tongue and flap the reins, and there he went, as if drifting on a cloud. He had never been inside any of the carriages; neither had Harry. Will Hartford always cleaned them himself. He saw the buildings around the courtyard float past and was overawed by a feeling of luxury and importance. But when the coach started to lurch and sway on the

road, his thigh began to hurt. He grabbed the strap by the window and tried to hold on to it, lifting his thigh off the seat, but the stabs became so violent that he cried out to Will Hartford to slow down. Will did not hear him; all he could see of Will was his shadow moving to and fro across the little window in the roof, each time the carriage pitched into a pothole and bounced back. It was torture; he hoped the bumps would get less once they got to town. But the cobblestones turned out to be worse; he had been able to brace himself more or less against the lurches and the bounces, but the cobbles caused the whole coach to shudder and he wailed in agony.

At last the coach halted. Will Hartford opened the door; Bonny nearly fell out of it. It took him several moments of standing still, eyes closed, clinging to Will Hartford's arm, before he could put his weight on his sore leg and limp painfully to the door of the courthouse. Will Hartford carried the box of gifts and explained the purpose of their visit to the constable's men at the door. At first they did not want to let them in. Then the constable himself appeared, and Will Hartford had to tell the whole story all over again.

The constable said, 'Justice Sawrey has ordered that the prisoner be treated leniently, so the boy may come in to take him the message. But thou must wait here, my man.'

'All right,' Will Hartford said. 'Now, art thou sure thou canst walk alone, Bonny?'

'Oh, yes,' he answered, for the delay had helped him recover somewhat.

'He may need help on the stairs,' Will Hartford said to the constable, 'he favours his left leg. Maybe someone can carry this box for him, he might drop it on those stone steps.'

'Ah, thou knowest the inside of our jail from experience, I gather,' the constable said.

'No, but I never knew any steps down into a dungeon that were carpeted,' Will Hartford replied. Obviously, he and the constable did not like each other much.

'All right, lad, come in.' The constable held out his hand. 'I'll take thee down myself. Give me that box.' To Will Hartford he added 'He won't be long. The prisoner is only allowed visitors for five minutes at a time.' Then he took Bonny by the shoulder and began to guide him down the steps, into the darkness.

The first thing Bonny noticed as he descended, cautiously, was a stench that was vaguely familiar; it became stronger as they

ventured farther into the world below. It was too dark for him to see where he was going; then they reached a landing, where the constable lit a lantern before going on. 'Take it easy, lad,' he said. 'Down here it's damp, the steps may be slippery. Does it pain thee much?'

'Not too much, sir,' he replied politely. 'As long as I'm careful not to put my weight on my leg.'

'Was it thy ankle?'

'No, sir, my thigh.' The stench was becoming stronger.

'Thy thigh? That must have been difficult to set. Did Master Phelps do it?'

'No, sir, *he* did . . .' He gestured with his head towards the darkness into which they descended.

'John McHair? Thou art tell me a fancy story!'

'No, sir, no, sir! He did it. He had once set the thighbone of a dog.'

'Well!' The constable sniggered. 'That would make him quite an expert! Let's hope it won't set thee barking! Now, watch out here, me lad. Careful! This next step has a hole in it. Right. Now turn to thy left . . . I'm not going too fast, am I? Is all well?'

'Yes, sir — thank you, sir . . .' But all was not well at all; he felt like throwing up, so sickening had the stench become. He had met it once before when Apple, the old piebald mare, had lain wheezing in the stable, dying with lung rot. It suddenly came back to him: the heaving, labouring breath full of squeals and rattles, the terror in the huge, moist eye as it caught the light of the lantern, the ghastly grin of yellow teeth, and that horrible, putrid stench, as if she lay already rotting in her grave with only her head still clinging to life. 'It would have been best had the mistress allowed me to put her out of her suffering when her agony started,' Will Hartford had said as he stood looking down upon poor old Apple's glistening eye and its mute, uncomprehending terror. 'Mercy from a distance can be a cruel thing.'

Those words rang in Bonny's memory as he caught his first glimpse of a motionless, prostrate body in the straw, in the feeble light of the constable's lantern after he had opened the door.

'Hey there! John! John McHair! Wake up, man! Here's a visitor for thee!'

Straw rustled; the body stirred, but did not turn towards them. It lay there so still and buried that Bonny could not make out where the head was and where the feet.

'Come on!' the constable shouted, and he nudged the body with a foot. 'Come on, bestir thyself! Is this the way to welcome a messenger from the Hall?'

The body moaned; then something seemed to sit up in the straw, something small, a mannikin. The lantern light swung closer, and Bonny stifled a scream. It was the stump of an arm, swollen, filthy, oozing from a huge running sore. The stench was so overwhelming that he stood there swaying, giddy and faint.

'Come on, lad, brace up!' the constable said. 'Let's leave this box with him so he can open it when it suits him. He is obviously not going to wake up in thy honour.'

'But — but I have to read to him, sir. I have to read the letter . . .'

'Whose letter?'

'Mistress Fell's, sir. She wrote him a letter, and I promised I would read it to him in person.'

The constable hesitated; then he kicked the body viciously and shouted, 'Come, get up, thou sack of filth! A great lady went to the trouble to write thee a letter, and thou canst not even be bothered to wake up! Come on, up! Up!' Again the boot kicked the body, sending a small puff of chaff whirling in the lantern light.

The body moved. It rolled over heavily, and Bonny saw with amazement and revulsion that the head was where he had thought the legs to be. It was barely recognisable as human, so thickly had straw and blood matted its hair and beard; from that tangled bush he was suddenly, breathtakingly, fixed by the baleful stare of old Apple's terrified, dying eye. So hallucinating was the resemblance that he would have turned and run if the constable had not held on to his arm.

'Come on, lad, let's get this over with. Where is thy letter? Read it to him. Come, I haven't got all day!'

'Yes, sir, yes, sir . . .' His hand trembled as he reached inside his doublet. He pulled out the letter and opened it; without looking at the staring eye, he read, '*Dear and Tender and Loving Brother in the Truth of God. My tenderest love to thee in thy cruel affliction. I cannot tell thee how my heart goes out to thee . . .*'

He read all three pages of it, without mistakes; when he was through, he still did not dare look at the body in the straw, but asked the constable, 'Was that all right, sir?'

The constable stood looking at him with an absent-minded

expression, as if he had not been listening. 'What was that, lad?'

'Did I do all right, sir?' he repeated foolishly, still not daring to look back at that horrible eye.

'Oh, yes — yes, thou didst well, lad. Who taught thee to read so well?'

'The house mother in the foundling house in Kendal, sir, and Ann Traylor . . .'

The constable said, 'Oh, yes, of course. Now, do we leave the box, or dost thou want to open it up for him?'

Bonny did not, but Mistress Fell was sure to question him in detail; he could not tell her that he had been too fainthearted to complete his mission. 'I think we must open it, sir.' he answered. 'There are little notes with the presents and I have been told to read them to him.' He noticed how they were talking about the body as if it were a dumb animal like Apple, as if the real John McHair had nothing to do with that filthy bundle of rags, that ghoulish stump, that horrible eye.

'Well, let's get on with it.' The constable squatted by its side and opened the lid. The first thing he brought out was a bundle of underclothing; he detached the not that was pinned to it and reached it up to Bonny. 'All right, read it.'

'This is a change of underclothing for thee, dear friend,' Bonny read. *'Please send thy dirty linen back with Bonny Baker so we may launder it for thee and keep thee supplied with clean linen every week during thy confinement.'*

The constable looked up at him, open-mouthed and back at the bundle in the lantern light. 'Underclothing? Drawers for a poacher — And clean ones every week?'

'That's what the mistress said, sir.'

'Well, I must say . . .' The constable put the bundle down gingerly, as if it were fragile. 'What's next?'

It was a picture-book with Biblical scenes that Bonny remembered bringing into the house once from the lawn, where one of the young ladies had left it. He had not dared to open it at the time; it had looked very expensive. He pulled out the note that protruded from its pages and read, *'This book may help thee, dear John, to while away the empty hours and maybe inspire some reflections on what others went through for the sake of their faith.'*

The constable gazed at the book, astounded, opened it cautiously to look at some of the coloured pictures, then put it in the

straw beside the bundle of underclothing with the same reverence. The next present was a pack of candles; but before Bonny had been able to read the note attached, the constable said importantly, 'He can't have those. Candles are not allowed in prison.' He tossed the package back into the box and pulled out another one: a small bundle of dried heather.

The note that went with it read, '*May the scent of this bracken remind thee, dear friend, of they beloved fells and assure thee that when the day comes in which thou canst roam them once more in freedom thou wilt find many loving friends waiting for thee.*' The constable was about to put it down with the rest when suddenly the straw rustled and the body rose on an elbow. A grimy hand reached out in the lantern light and a voice, cracked and broken, whispered: 'Give to me . . .'

The constable placed the small posy of heather in the hand. Although Bonny did not want to look, he could not help himself. He saw the hand lift the little bouquet of heather to the dirty nose that stuck out of the matted hair, and heard deep, wheezing inhalations.

'Come on, come on,' the constable urged him, 'let's get this over! What's this?'

One by one, Bonny read the notes that went with the rest of the presents: a comb, a bottle of toilet water, a bag of sweetmeats, a roll of gaily coloured kerchiefs, and, finally, one mitten and a little red bonnet. The message attached to them ran, '*Dearly beloved friend, the cold weather is coming and in our concern to bring thee comfort and a token of our loving thoughts, please find here a mitten for thy left hand and one woollen muff for thy right arm. May all this convey to thee what need not be put into words among children of the Light.*

To his surprise and embarrassment, Bonny saw tears running into the filthy beard. Yet, somehow, the eyes were no longer those of a dying mare, but those of a man awakening.

'Well!' the constable said, getting to his feet. 'That was the nicest parcel I ever saw sent to a prisoner in my time. Any message for the lady, McHair?'

The eyes looked from one to the other, then the voice said, 'Dove . . . Tell her she is the dove . . .'

'The dove,' the constable said. 'Whatever that may mean.' He picked up the lantern again and took Bonny by the arm. As they walked down the corridor, the prisoner's voice called after them, 'The letter! Give me my letter!'

'But thou canst not read, man!' the constable called back.

'My letter,' the voice pleaded, 'give me my letter!'

'All right,' the constable grunted, 'give it here, laddie.' He took the letter from Bonny. 'And let's have those candles too, so the poor brute can see it, at least.'

When he rejoined the waiting boy and took his arm again, he muttered, 'Women!' as if with that one word he put it all behind him.

* * *

Alone, squatting in the straw by the light of a candle the constable had lit for him, John McHair surveyed the objects surrounding him, touching each one in turn the way he used to touch the first furry buds of the willow in spring. The comb, the bottle of toilet water, the sweetmeats, the kerchiefs, the underclothing, the picture-book, the jar of plums. He picked up the sprig of bracken, inhaled its fragrance of freedom and summer, then turned to the greatest miracle of all, the mitten and the little red sock. That those friends, those loving friends, had sent him a mitten for his hand and a sock for his stump was proof of their concern for *him*, John McHair, dear, beloved friend John. Who said the loss of his hand was the loss of his life? He picked up the mitten, then the little sock, and suddenly he felt as if life were only beginning. A new life, fuller than before, for not only had he been given back his old self, there seemed to be more of him, not less.

He wanted to pray, a prayer of thanks to God; but he could not think of any words, only sounds: the wind in the trees, the whisper of the rain, the great swelling sound of the forest awakening in a summer dawn.

* * *

Margaret Fell was in her bedchamber, reading in the grey light of the evening, when Bonny Baker came to report on his visit to John McHair. He described in his boyish voice how he had found the man; he told her of the effect of her gifts; he gave her the message he had been given, '*The dove. Tell her she is the dove.*'

It was quite touching, but the gloom in which she had sat there prevailed. Bonny left her sitting in the window seat, gazing at the rain, the Bible on her lap.

In her misery, she had turned to it again; it had always helped

her in the past. But this time, as she read the marvellous story of our Saviour, she discovered to her horror that George had spoiled even that. Reading about Christ, how He had spoken and acted, she was struck by a haunting similarity to George himself. Instead of a spirit of love and compassion, ethereal, almost disembodied, she found a swarthy George roaming the hills of Galilee, a rabble-rouser who invoked the ire of the priests by saying he was the son of God. George said the same thing, angering the priests, who maintained that the only child of God was Jesus, only Jesus was perfection. But was He? On the one hand, she saw Him much more clearly: a swarthy George; on the other, she suddenly discovered traits in the ethereal spirit of pure love that gave Him a shocking humanity, even maleness. His destroying with heavenly fire that innocent little fig tree, for instance, only because it happened to have no fruit available at the moment of His passing — exactly what George would have done. And the poor farmer who owned the herd of Gadarene swine! She saw him rub his hands the night before, saying to his wife, 'Well, a couple more weeks and they will be ready for market! I've never seen 'em as fat and slick as they are this time! They should fetch a good price!' How stunned the poor people must have been the next day when they were told that a passing saint had cured the village idiot by casting the evil spirits into their herd of swine, which had proceeded to hurl themselves over the cliff, the lot of them. In effect, it was the farmer who had paid for the miracle. Should he not have been consulted? Or at least thanked afterwards by the saint who had dashed all the man's hopes by this demonstration of his divine powers? Exactly what George would have done! That was what he had been doing all along: miracles, convincements, rapture, and there was John McHair bleeding in the straw, mutilated for life, Bonny with his broken thigh. And where was the saint at this moment? Somewhere, on his horse, on his way to see the Protector. And why? Because God told him. Which God? Which God, for heaven's sake?!

This was what bewildered her to the point of desperation: there did not seem to be any consistency in the Scriptures when it came to the nature of God. One moment He smote entire cities, babies and all; the next, Jesus described Him as a merciful Father, fount of love, light of the world. What about the other miracles Jesus had wrought in the name of His merciful Father? In her present state of desolation it seemed to her that most of them were executed almost petulantly, the only purposes being to

convince the spectators that He was indeed the Son of God. What about the thousands of sick people, for instance, who had come limping, crawling and staggering to the wayside so they might touch the hem of His garment as He passed and be cured? Only a few of them, picked at random, had received the benefit of His miraculous powers. What about the other thousands, all those sad, crippled creatures racked by pain, beset by the terror of death, who had failed to catch the bridal bouquet of salvation tossed by the Son of Man? Exactly like George! It was cruel to convert people only to leave them bewildered, like John McHair, herself, all the others in the house, in town. The miserable prophet! He had ridden off not only with her heart, her peace, her God, but with her Saviour as well, leaving her bereft, utterly alone.

She could face it no longer. She must tear herself away, occupy herself with the evening meal, the children, anything to force her eyes away from that precipice of despair. She managed to rally and go downstairs; but that night, during meeting, the thoughts about George came back. He had turned out to be imperfect, weak, selfish — like the rest of them. Yet his power had been real. He had conveyed to her, to all of them, a real awareness of the presence of God. Now here they were, abandoned. How many others were there like them, all over England? This was only one town; there must be hundreds of John McHairs languishing in prison in George's wake. In her mind's eye she saw the straw, the bloodied bandage, the joy of the man who had just received a beautiful present, and suddenly she found herself thinking: If I could do it for John McHair, why not for those others left behind and forgotten? There must be hundreds —

Suddenly a mysterious energy seemed to sweep through her, forcing her to her feet. 'Friends,' she said, 'you know that I wrote John McHair a letter and sent him a few tokens of our concern. You heard from Bonny the effect this had on him. George Fox has affected the lives of many others like him. How many are there at this moment in the same condition as John McHair? Imprisoned, betrayed, beyond reach . . .' She hesitated, was it right to talk about practical things in ministry? But that energy swept her along. 'I want to write to other Meetings, asking for the names of Friends in prison. I want to know details about each one of them, so I may send them a personal letter. We could even send them each a parcel with gifts, food, clothes, anything to alleviate their loneliness, their despair. If all of us join forces, we

may be able to send them more than just one. We may be able to send one regularly, say, every month. This way we would, with divine assistance, give sense to George Fox's visit to Swarthmoor Hall. He said in his ministry: nothing that happens to us is senseless. If we want to discover a sense in his passing our way, it seems we will have to provide it ourselves.'

She opened her eyes and looked about her, disoriented, for the mysterious energy had left her. She found herself, bewildered, committed to something she had not had a chance to think about. Suddenly full of doubt, she was about to sit down when someone in the circle rose and came towards her, arms outstretched. To her astonishment, she saw it was Ann Traylor. The girl embraced her and said, 'God bless thee, Margaret Fell.' Then she went back to her seat.

Hours later she finally found herself in her bedchamber. The mood in the house had changed completely; gone were the despondency, the sense of abandonment; everyone had responded to her idea with a zest and an inventiveness that were surprising. It had been decided that those people in town who sympathised with them would be approached for contributions, in money or in kind. She herself would do the writing, but if the number of Friends in prison was anywhere near what she thought it might be, she would need help. It looked, in fact, like the beginning of an organised church, rather than a haphazard band of people interrupting sermons, refusing to remove their hats, challenging authority and ending up in jail.

Her enthusiasm was such that she undressed quickly, eager to kneel by the bed and thank God for His goodness. But as she knelt there, the words that came to her seemed hollow, meaningless, flat. Instead of sinking into silence, she became conscious of the asthmatic breathing of Mongol, the pug, which had again sneaked on to the bed. What a thought for someone who had just been blessed by a Revelation! Come, she told herself, be still, silence thy thoughts, even the small babbling ones, and wait for that of God to rise within thee.

What rose was the thought: '*What is Thomas going to say when he finds his house turned into a mailing station?*' And then, '*It will serve him right.*' This was shocking! This was not the way . . . There came another thought. '*What will George think when his movement is being taken away from him? It will serve him right too.*'

Aghast, she opened her eyes, to be met by the vacant stare of the pug. Had she, in heavenly inspiration, quaking from head to foot as the storm of the Presence swept through her, been doing nothing but cooking up a device for revenge?

She got up and wandered over to the window, opening the curtains to gaze out at the night; but all she could see were black wet windowpanes full of squiggling raindrops. She sat down at her dresser. Look at that face! She closed her eyes. There was the silence again. Once it had been full of light, joy, certainty, love ... *'If anything will bring him back, this will.'*

Oh, my God! The eyes that stared at her in the mirror were wide with horror. Was this the truth? Was the whole plan no more than a trick to get George back? If so, she should go downstairs, call them together to tell them it had all been a mistake! But what would she say? 'Friends, I have discovered that it was not that of God in me, but that of the devil'? The confusion, the bewilderment! Not now. She should not think about it now. Tomorrow it would all become clear.

She went to bed and kicked at Mongol through the covers. 'Off! Get off the bed, thou pop-eyed—' That was unfair. To stumble upon the truth about herself and kick the dog for it? No wonder he didn't trust her. Nobody should trust her. Least of all she herself.

'Take his church away from him and he'll come running ...'

Well, whatever it was, it was true. Once his converts, now scattered over the prisons of England, were drawn into one organised body, he could not help becoming their captive. His church would become his cage, and she would have the key.

Again she covered her face with her hands, in shame. She was worthless, a conniving bitch. Poor John McHair! She was about to do to hundreds of others exactly what she had done to him: write a letter addressed to him, but directed at a fleeing horseman heading for the hills, cloak fluttering. Yet John McHair did not seem to have minded; whatever her motives had been, there could be no doubt as to the effect. Was it immaterial whether she did it as a saint or as a sinner, as long as she did it? Did God, whoever or whatever or wherever He was, really avail Himself of people like her to do His work? It was a ray of hope.

She wetted her fingers and reached out to snuff the candle flame. In the darkness she heard Mongol sigh and felt him settle down in the hollow between her legs. 'Oh, Thomas, Thomas!'

she thought theatrically. 'Why hast thou deserted me?' Well, that was easy: because she had ground her heel on his gouty foot. What a thing for a convert to have done! But don't let's start all that over again.

She turned on her side, shoving Mongol out of his nest as she did so, and composed herself for sleep. She was just drifting off when, out of nowhere, she heard George's voice. '*It takes time for Him to reach thee. First, thou must accept thyself as thou art.*' He had been standing in the sunlight, the bank of red roses behind him.

Well, she finally knew herself as she really was. But should she accept that? Should she not throw herself upon the mercy of Christ, now that she knew she *really* was a miserable sinner? Or should she say: 'All right, Maggie, thou art a bitch; now get on with those letters'?

She slid out of bed, knelt down and prayed, 'God, here I am. Thou knowest me for what I am. Even so, perhaps Thou canst use me. I cannot promise that I will be able to change, though. Is that acceptable to Thee? It will have to be, for that seems to be the way of it. Both Thou and I had better accept me as I am, and hope for the best. Amen.'

It did not give her a sense of liberation, but peacefulness of a sort; at least they knew now where they stood. No one need know except God and she and, possibly, Thomas. Suddenly she had the uncomfortable feeling that Thomas knew already. Yet he loved her. She was not sure of anybody else, but Tom loved her all right.

She got to her feet, lit the candle again, put on her robe and went to her dresser. There she lit the candles by the mirror, fetched her inkwell, quill and paper, pushed aside the pots and jars and started to draft a letter to the Meetings.

'*Dear Friends, this Meeting has a concern about those who find themselves imprisoned for Truth's sake . . .*'

She wrote and rewrote it, while Mongol watched her from his foxhole in the counterpane. Finally, she signed it: '*Margaret Fell, Meeting for the alleviation of the sufferings of Friends in prison.*' That was too cumbersome. *Meeting for the sufferings of prisoners?*

She tried it several ways and ended up with: '*Margaret Fell, recording clerk; Meeting for Sufferings.*'

CHAPTER SEVEN

HENRIETTA BEST did not know what prompted her to go and see Margaret Fell again, but the moment the thought struck her, she decided to act upon it. She did not stop to consider that more than a month had gone by since Fox's departure; all she thought about was how she herself would feel at the realisation that the man she loved was gone forever. There was no doubt in her mind that Margaret Fell had fallen in love with him; a woman could fool herself about her relationship with a man only as long as he was around. The moment he had left, she would drop all pretence, and no wonder; at that moment her heart would break and the awful, awful sickness begin: the agony, the hopeless yearning with every fibre of her body, every nerve, for his presence, his touch; her every waking thought, her every dream would be centred on him in unbearable, self-inflicted torture. It was the most harrowing torment to which women were prone, and it made no difference how old they were, how wise, how rich, how well schooled in the control of their emotions. To see a woman in that anguish made every other woman want to sneak away and leave her to lick her own wounds, knowing that for this torment there was no solace, no cure. The only remedy was time.

In the carriage, on her way to the Hall, Henrietta knew that even if the house were filled with gloom, her happiness would be a match for it. She would be able to give the poor woman something any other reasonably cautious female would hesitate to give: tenderness and compassion. Who knew? Margaret Fell might welcome a shoulder to cry on, a chance to let go at last.

It came as a shock to find the Hall a beehive of activity, and its mistress, instead of steeped in misery, preoccupied with preparations for what seemed to be a huge, unseasonable Christmas party. Long tables in the main hall were covered with a multitude of small objects in the process of being wrapped; every servant, it seemed, was taking part in the frenzied activity, as well as the entire family. Everybody was sorting out gifts, consulting lists, wrapping parcels; the air was spiced with the scent of sealing wax and smoking candles; instead of gloom and despondency, the mood was one of joy and anticipation.

When Margaret Fell caught sight of her, she dropped what she

was doing and came to welcome her, rather effusively, as if she had noticed her visitor's self-conscious discomfort. This was not at all what Henrietta had had in mind; before she knew what had happened, she found herself wrapping parcels with the rest of them. Somebody told her the recipients would be prisoners, but the first present she wrapped seemed a strange choice for someone in a dungeon: a small brass kaleidoscope, the worse for wear, which must have belonged to a series of children before being discarded. Puzzled by its incongruity, she sneaked a look through it, to see if it perhaps contained a secret message; but all she saw was coloured stars and diamonds, fascinating only to someone under the age of five. She lowered the toy self-consciously when she heard Margaret Fell's voice beside her. 'Ah, yes, the kaleidoscope! Let me see . . .' She consulted a list. 'This is going to Herbert Meiklejohn, in York prison. Now, where is the note to go with it?' She searched among a sheaf of papers she carried in her hand; Henrietta looked at her flushed cheeks, her youthful beauty. There was about her a tenderness and a joy which, coupled with this frantic activity, stirred up some vague memory from long ago.

'Here it is!' She handed Henrietta a piece of paper. 'If you will, please put it with the present. Maybe the best thing would be to wrap it around the kaleidoscope, don't you think? I don't want him to miss it.'

'That seems a good idea,' Henrietta said lamely.

The other noticed her bewilderment. 'I'm sorry to put you to work like this,' she said, again rather effusively. 'You must wonder what this is all about!'

'I gather that you are planning to surprise some prisoners of your church. I didn't realise that they put children in prison too for this.'

'Children?'

'Well — this kaleidoscope, isn't it going to a child?'

'Herbert Meiklejohn? Good heavens, no. He is professor of astronomy at Oxford. That's why I chose it for him.' She brushed a strand of hair off her forehead; suddenly she looked tired. Dark rings showed around her eyes; under the flush on her cheeks was a hint of pallor.

'Aren't you doing too much?' Henrietta asked impulsively. 'You look exhausted.'

'Oh, no, no!' She tried to hide it with a forced smile. 'Just a little queasy, that's all. Why don't you and I sit down in my room

over there for a moment? I haven't even asked you yet what gives me the pleasure of your visit. You must think me uncivil indeed.'

'Not at all. Shall we go there now?'

'One second.' She put an apologetic hand on Henrietta's arm. 'I'll be right back, let me just . . .' She did not finish; off she went to one of her daughters, messily stuffing a string of sausages into what seemed to be a sock.

Henrietta could not resist sneaking a look at the note to the professor of astronomy. '*Dear Friend Herbert*,' it ran. '*We thought this simple toy might give thee the opportunity to explain to thy fellow inmates, or even thy jailer, some of the principles of thy scientific work, in so far as it concerns the refraction of light and the colours of the spectrum. Thou might find this a suitable way of introducing a discussion about the Light in ourselves, and the joy of answering that of God in one another. Let us know, dear Friend, any special wishes and desires; we will comply with them if we can. Let me assure thee, dear John, of our loving thoughts and constant prayers for thee, as thou art carrying our burden with such courage and loving power. Thy Friend, Margaret Fell, Recording Clerk, Meeting for Sufferings.*' It was a sweet letter, so obviously sincere that, hiding it behind her reticule, Henrietta discreetly changed 'John' into 'Herbert'.

She had finished wrapping the parcel when Margaret Fell beckoned to her from a door in the far corner which led to a small, untidy withdrawing-room. A desk by the window was strewn with papers, a tea set and incongruous knick-knacks, obviously awaiting their designation as gifts. The autumn light, streaming in through the narrow window, was bright with the clearness of winter; it made the woman look even more exhausted. She must be taxing her strength to the utmost; it seemed a Herculean task.

'How many prisoners are you sending parcels to, Mistress Fell?'

Margaret Fell laughed. 'Thus far, sixty-eight, but that covers only part of the country. We haven't received the list from the Midlands yet, or from Wales. Would you like some mint tea? I'll send for some fresh . . .'

'No, thank you. Do you intend to send presents to all of your co-religionists in prison?'

'Oh, yes. We intend to send each of them a parcel every month, if we can, and I hope to write them a letter every week.'

'But you can't possibly! Sixty letters a week, as well as all those parcels?'

The woman laughed, but it did not sound convincing. She looked desperately tired; there was about her a translucent quality that was disturbing. Henrietta felt a great sympathy for her, for she sensed, underneath it all, the heartbreaking grief and loneliness that she had expected. The young man had been in his twenties, Margaret Fell must be well into her thirties; a classic situation. The gallantry of her trying to fight it with work was very moving.

'Why?' she asked.

'Pardon?'

'Why are you doing all this?'

The other gave her a quick look. 'Oh, I discovered by chance how much it means to a prisoner if he feels that someone in the outside world is aware of him and cares about him.' She smiled. 'Believe it or not, it was you who decided me. That night we had all those injured people here, you said something that has stayed with me ever since.'

Despite her sympathy, Henrietta stiffened. She had managed to push that memory aside and did not want to be reminded of it.

Margaret Fell must have noticed her discomfort for she added hastily, 'Forgive me, I don't mean to distress you. But do you recall saying to me, "He performs miracles — to what end?" I was shocked at the time; I have since discovered that you were right. It would all be pointless unless someone else gives the people he touched a sense of continuity, of constancy . . . I am trying to convince them that he meant what he said when he spoke about — about his loving them.' She walked to the window. Although her back was turned, she could not hide the tears in her voice. 'That is what they need, love. Oh, they need it so badly! Those poor, poor people, sinking into loneliness, doubt, despair . . .' She turned away from the window; the light showed all her secrets. 'I am determined not to let that happen,' she said. 'And I can do it, because I am a woman.'

Henrietta was deeply moved. But something in the woman's eyes, the sheen on her hair, an intangible element about her bemused her. Then suddenly it all fell into place: radiant tenderness, frantic activity, queasiness, that peculiar, translucent pallor . . . 'Shouldn't you slow down a little?' she asked gently. 'For one who is with child, you are doing far too much.'

A look of utter astonishment crossed the other's face. Then she said, 'Oh, no . . . !'

'Forgive me, I must be imagining things.' Could it be that Fox was the father? Was that why she was so distressed? No; not with that inveterate innocence. The pregnancy must be the result of the sudden increase in marital passion that always accompanied the early stages of adulterous infatuation. Strange how women's most personal experiences followed such common patterns.

Margaret Fell had sunk down in the chair at her desk. 'Oh, Lord . . .' she said wearily. 'Of course, that's what it is! How could I be so stupid? One would think I should know by now . . .' She looked with stunned despair at the papers on her desk, the knick-knacks awaiting a destination. 'How am I going to — ' She did not finish. She set her jaw. 'Well. I had better start organising things differently.'

Henrietta said calmly, 'You are not going to organise anything right now. You are going to stay where you are. Look, all you need is a few women like myself who have time on their hands and are prepared to help you out for a while, writing those letters for you . . .'

'Letters?' She had not quite recovered from the shock. 'No, I must write those letters myself.'

'Well, perhaps sign them yourself, but I don't think it is a good idea for you to try and write sixty-eight or more a week, even if you were not with child. If you take on too many of them, you are bound to get mixed up.'

'What do you mean?'

'The letter you wrote to go with the kaleidoscope. I'm sure Professor Meiklejohn will love every word of it, but you start by calling him Herbert and end up calling him John.'

As if this were the last straw, the poor woman looked at her with dull despair. 'Well, I'll have to do that one again, won't I?'

'No, you won't. I changed it for you. Maybe I should write the whole thing over again. All you'll have to do is sign. But what you need right now,' she said, getting to her feet, 'is some nourishing broth. I'll go and see your cook.'

The woman rose heavily and went with her to the door. Henrietta Best put an arm around her shoulders. 'Look,' she said, 'one child under your heart, seven under your roof, sixty-eight in prison? *Voyons, soyez raisonnable.*'

For a moment it seemed as if Margaret Fell would continue,

crazily, to shoulder the world and all its woes alone; then she surrendered to that sheltering arm.

Henrietta Best put the mistress of Swarthmoor Hall to bed for a nap, arranged for a light meal to be sent up in an hour; then she tackled the chaos downstairs. She recruited a girl called Ann to help her with the correspondence and proceeded to write her first letter. To her dismay, it turned out to be flippant, despite her earnest intentions. *Enfin*, she decided with realistic resignation, it may have little to do with Quakerism, or whatever it is called this time, but perhaps I can make them laugh.

Twenty-eight years before, as a proud young convert, the idea would have shocked her; now she thought differently. As she had come to know from bitter experience, saintliness was impervious to suffering and oppression; it might, conceivably, be vulnerable to laughter. She was going to try it, with a sense of vocation, for anyone clinging to saintliness who could possibly rid himself of it was crazy *comme la lune*. It seemed an unsuitable way of resuming life as a convert, but this was what God had finally made of her, after many trials and errors, and if He did not like the final product, *zut*!

'*Dear and beloved Friend Edward Harrow. Believe it or not; this muffler is for you.*' She mumbled, '*Merde!* "Thee"!' crumpled the sheet into a ball and started again. '*Dear and beloved Friend Edward Harrow . . .*' A limping boy brought in lighted candles; she remembered his coming to her house during that thunderstorm with the news that two men were drowning in the quicksands. It reminded her of her dear, unsuspecting husband. The news of her new activity, when it got to him, would be quite a shock; it might not be a bad idea to have it brought to him by this child.

She told the boy to go to her house with a note for Colonel Best. The haughty girl called Ann intervened. 'He can't do that, ma'am; he still limps.'

'Never you mind, *chère*,' she replied with calm authority. 'He will be taken there and back in my coach. It is waiting outside.'

She felt in complete control, on top of the world, yet deep inside her was a small, cold fear.

* * *

Until the boy from the Hall delivered his wife's note, Colonel Best had assumed that she was delayed and would merely be late for dinner. But even the few scribbled lines were enough to

arouse his anxiety. Something about the note did not sound right; it had a false flippancy that conveyed something quite different. It read like a note sent by a prisoner, innocuous to anyone except a close relative to whom it conveyed a secret, frantic call for help.

When finally she came home, late that night, she managed, however, to convince him that he had worried needlessly. As she told it, gay and excited, she had finally found something to divert her during her leisure hours. The idea of sending letters and parcels to all Quakers in prison sounded harebrained, but this might indeed be a way to put her mind off other things. She almost convinced him; but that night he was awakened by her dreaming aloud. It obviously was not a pleasant dream, and her mumbled words were French.

It revived all his earlier suspicions. After he had gently shaken her awake and she had drifted off again into sleep, her head on his shoulder, he lay worrying, staring at the ceiling. Of course his first feeling of apprehension had been right; by becoming involved once again in a religious movement, in people being hurt and molested and sent to prison, she had succumbed to the tidal pull of the past. It was almost as if she had been so terrified of a precipice that she now had thrown herself over it out of sheer desperation. She was the last person to write to religious fanatics in prison. Perhaps he should take her abroad, or visit Margaret Fell himself and explain to her why his wife should not be allowed to do this; or they could enlarge the garden, as they had been discussing of late; anything to give her something else to do. But none of it would work. She had at last been claimed by her *alter ego*, Henriette de Coligny, who had collapsed into temporary insanity when her children were brained in front of her eyes and had awakened, after weeks of aimless wandering, as a shabby little cocotte, 'La Douce Tété'. He lay there, frantically searching for a means to protect her from the demons of her past, but there was no way out now his own love had failed.

At breakfast the next morning she asked casually, 'By the way — dost thou remember thou asked me, a month or so ago, what Thomas Fell should do to bring his wife to her senses?'

'Why, yes . . . get her with child.'

She laughed. 'Well, he did. That really is the reason why she needs help.'

He muttered some remark, but his mind was racing. Suddenly he had the answer to his prayer.

That morning, on the pretext that he had to go and look at a horse Simon Rutledge had told him about, he rode off to the town of Kendal without his groom. In Kendal was a foundling house of which he was one of the regents; it was full of infants waiting for childless couples to pick them up and rear them as their own. To get her with child! It was his only hope; at their age this could only be achieved by giving her a little foundling to mother.

He set out with a sense of purpose and relief; but as he cantered down the winding trail across the fells, the sombre landscape, already touched by winter, got the better of his cheerful self-confidence. How would she accept a strange child? He did not really know how vivid was her memory of her own children and whether the cure might not be worse than the disease. The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that if he were to present her with a little orphan himself she would almost certainly turn it down. But what if the child were found on her doorstep? This would seem an act of God; chances were that she might at least consent to keep it until the formalities of putting it into a foundling house were over, and he could see to it that those formalities took a long time.

The joyous self-confidence with which he had set out did not return, however. Alone on the melancholy moors underneath the stormy sky, his thoughts centred on the child itself. What would it be like? It was not as if he were on his way to pick a lap dog for her, although he felt no compunction about asking the matron of the foundling house for the pick of the litter. A child was a human being — at least, it would be, before too long; how could he be certain that he was not bringing a born scoundrel or a future harlot into his house? Despite the fact that he was one of the regents of the Kendal home, he did not know much about the inmates. In some cases, a child's background could be established on the basis of the clothes it was wearing when found or a little note pinned to the basket; sometimes the mother was a woman of good breeding who had been forced to abandon a child of love; Moses had been a foundling of noble birth. But even if it were such a child, what about the responsibility? He was fifty-six, his wife fifty-two; it was realistic to expect that in another ten or fifteen years he would be gone, and though his wife might be around awhile longer, the child was certain to lose its parents at a tender age. Of course he would leave it well provided for, but was that enough? Lofty as his motives might be, he could not rid

himself of the uneasy notion that, somehow, he was about to commit an unpardonable sin against another human being. He frowned, disturbed by the trend of his thoughts; it almost seemed, despite his hearty dislike of the man, that Fox the Quaker had infected him with some of his high-flown notions. One phrase in particular, which at the time he had merely registered as another of the Quaker's aphorisms, came back to him, '*Never use a man as a means, only as a goal.*' Here was a clear instance of a man being used as a means; he was not on his way to Kendal to save a child but to save his wife.

But this was ridiculous; even though the child was not his primary concern, whoever he was to pick from the litter could call himself fortunate. The difference between being reared as a pauper, a ward of the church, or as the only son of Colonel William Best with an assured future was enough to justify the deed, even if the child would in all probability be orphaned once more before reaching maturity. But what about himself? To put it bluntly, he was about to mess up his life, the few years of it that were left to him. At his age he had a right to peace, privacy, a pleasant, calm existence without the noise, the untidiness and the constant upsets that went with small children. To put a cuckoo into his nest, of his own free will, was sheer folly.

As he rode on through Kendal forest, the increasing wind hissed and foamed in the shedding trees, sending whirling at him from the ghostly woods diapers, infant's colic, whooping cough, vomit on the carpet, snot on his chair, bat ears, inward squint, buck teeth, midnight screams, porridge flung across the room, piercing whistles. It was madness to solicit all that voluntarily and turn the peace and comfort of his declining years into purgatory, with death his only hope of liberation. His fears grew into panic, but when he reined his horse to turn around and head home, he could not do it. He had no choice. Unless he made this last, supreme effort to avert the destiny that awaited her, she would continue on the road to Golgotha, the ghastly catharsis of having herself crucified in expiation of her sins, which were the sins of the world, the Cardinal's, everybody's except her own. If ever there had been an innocent woman, victim of fate, it was La Douce Tété. He had no alternative; he had to do it, he had to — God have mercy on his frightened, elderly soul.

He arrived at the foundling house at noontime; the matron received him in her little office, amidst the racket of clanging pails, clattering dishes and banging spoons that echoed in a

nearby hall where the children must be having luncheon. She was a thinly smiling, genteel spinster of indeterminate age who spoke in hushed, awed tones as if God were listening in an adjoining office. He was surprised by her reaction to the information that he was ready to bestow upon one of her unfortunate children the blessings of his name, rank, riches and privileges, as well as the comforts of his luxurious home. She proved incomprehensibly reluctant; then, suddenly, he remembered that when she had first appeared in front of the Board of Regents a year ago to be considered for the post, he had voted against her. She had seemed to him sanctimonious and as cold as a fish, but the others had felt differently. Somehow she must have learned of his antagonism; this was her opportunity to get even. He said tartly, 'Madam, may I remind you that the purpose of this institution is to place children with families, rather than perpetuate the financial burden each of them represents to those who pay for you and your charitable enterprise?'

The matron pursed her lips. Her smile survived, but only as a ghost of its former self. 'I regret to have to say this, Colonel,' she said slowly and clearly, as if to make sure that God in the office next door would hear every word, 'but I have not only a responsibility towards the regents, I have a responsibility towards the children and, through the children, to our Lord. May I remind you of the words of Jesus Christ, St. Matthew, twenty-fifth chapter, "*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done to Me*"?'

'If I understand you rightly,' he retorted in his most glacial judicial manner, 'to lodge one of the least of these as a ward with my wife and myself would, in your opinion, be frowned upon by Christ. What are you surmising we want this child for, Madam? As a servant? To feed it gin and keep it small, so it may serve *hors-d'oeuvres* at our orgies without being able to see into the bed?' It was an image that, he realised too late, would do more harm than good; she must wonder at what time in the past he had acquired this knowledge about midgets in brothels. To judge by her beady eyes, it would provide ample food for spinsterish daydreams. Board or no board, he would see to it that she was replaced as soon as possible by someone more realistic about the chances her foundlings had to make good in life. All she was doing, in effect, was to confirm his first impression of her.

'My dear Colonel,' she replied, with the humble superiority his unfortunate outbursts had handed her on a platter, 'I am

convinced, of course, that any child you and Mistress Best would choose to make your own should be grateful for the honour. However, speaking plainly, I do not think it wise on your part to consider adopting a child of tender age. We do have a few older boys here that might be considered. One, a handsome little fellow, ten years old; another —'

'I do not want a ten-year-old handsome fellow!' he cried, exasperated. 'I want a child no older than a few weeks or a month, and I am not prepared to discuss it any further! I demand a clear and straightforward answer, Madam, to a clear and straightforward question: are you going to assist me in the choice of such a child, or are you going to force me to propose your dismissal to the Board of Regents?'

Her hands, folded in genteel prayer on her desk, went white at the knuckles. 'Put in those terms,' she replied, slowly and clearly for the benefit of God, 'you leave me no choice.'

He rose. 'Well,' he said with the kindness of the victor, 'now shall we look at the children, please?'

She stared at him with undisguised loathing; so obvious were her feelings that he found himself hoping she and John Sawrey would never get together; in the hands of an adroit schemer like him, her version of this little scene might be a powerful weapon. But he was beyond pussyfooting caution; his battle had been fought on the way here, on the barren fells and in the haunted forest; no argument this female might present could equal in severity the ones he had presented and disposed of himself.

She rose stiffly to her feet and with demonstrative obedience preceded him out of the office and down the hall. They crossed a high vaulted room where a score or so of toddlers were imbibing porridge from wooden bowls by the fistful, or having it spooned into them by buxom wenches, who rose respectfully as he passed. A few of the children stopped masticating porridge to gape at him, mouths open; the spectacle was so disenchanting that he found himself thinking, with callous humour, how much more effective the matron would have been had she, instead of raising his hackles, taken him straight into this room and left him there to contemplate his future at his ease.

They climbed dark, echoing stairs, crossed a landing and entered a ward full of identical cribs, each of them filled with a squalling homunculus purple in the face with apoplectic fury, trampling, waving puny fists. He was ready to concede that his idea was not only impractical but suicidal; one month with a

banshee like that in his house, throwing a fit every hour and smelling like a dung cart, and he would be ready to shoot himself. But after the way he had thrown his weight around in the office and blackmailed the matron into submission, the only way out of his self-applied noose was to pick one of them at random, have it trussed and bundled so that it could not leap out of his arms and break its neck on the way to Ulverston, and return it after a few days with a curt little note informing her that this particular foundling was not satisfactory and that they were looking elsewhere for a child. He forgot about picking the best of the litter and asked the woman, 'Which one would you recommend?'

She turned to a huge female squatting on a footstool who, with bovine casualness, was busy feeding two of the little monsters at her huge, heavily veined breasts. 'The Colonel is looking for a child,' she said, her voice raised to make herself heard above the din. 'Which ones are ready to go?'

The woman looked at him with the same gaping curiosity as the toddlers downstairs. The two piglets sucking her breasts grunted and smacked with passionate determination. 'Boy or girl?' she asked.

'Colonel?' The smile of the matron had come back to life; if Lazarus had risen with the same self-satisfaction, someone in the crowd would without doubt have slapped him back into his grave.

'It doesn't really matter,' he said gruffly; then, as an afterthought, he added, 'Maybe a little boy . . .'

'What about little Billy, over in the corner?' the wet-nurse ventured. 'He has been fed and changed; and he's a bonnie little fellow. Needs lots of lovin', though. I would like to see him find a home; I can't give him what he needs, not with all the others screaming their little heads off.'

'What didst thou say he needs?' the matron asked, with obvious relish.

'As I said, ma'am, lots of loving. Lots of hugs, kisses, tickles, coos and the like, somebody to tell him fifty times a day how beautiful he is, and how strong and lovable — and then hug and kiss and slap and tickle him all over again.'

The matron turned on him with sanctimonious sweetness and said, 'Well, Colonel, wouldn't that be something for you?'

'I am glad to see that you — er — have come round,' he said, in a vain effort to turn defeat into victory. 'Let me have a look at the — uh — little fellow.'

The huge woman pinched the noses of the two piglets until they released her and gasped for air; it sounded like the uncorking of two bottles. Deprived of their meal, the outraged infants burst into a leather-lunged protest; he backed away involuntarily, realising too late that the matron observed his every move with ill-concealed enjoyment. The fat woman put the two screaming, struggling homunculi into their cribs; then she waddled to the far corner and beckoned him. He joined her and looked down on a glum little face with big, dark eyes ruefully gazing at the ceiling. The tiny body outlined underneath the blanket seemed puny; the whole child seemed puny, with the exception of an enormous shock of jet-black hair coming to a point above its head.

'See?' the fat woman asked, turning down the blanket, revealing a bloated little belly and two little bow legs as thin as matchsticks. 'He's the only one who doesn't yell along with the others; he's a wise little fellow, is little Billy. Come on, Billy, come on, coo coo, coo coo coo!' She picked up the tiny creature; judging by the jerky movement of his little arms, it startled him considerably. She made him sit up against her shoulder, surreptitiously arranging his diaper so as to hide his wormlike little legs, smoothed down the preposterous point of hair and tickled him under the chin. 'Come on, Billy Boy, come on now, give us a little smile?' Billy Boy was not in the mood to smile; he looked at the stranger glumly and without enthusiasm. But at least he was quiet; if he could be counted on to remain quiet during the four hours to Ulverston, he would take him.

The matron asked in honeyed tones, 'Maybe the Colonel would like to hold him for a moment?'

Without hesitation, the wet-nurse put the infant in his arms. He was startled by its lack of weight and by the rancid, milky smell that emanated from it; it might as well have been a little dog or indeed a piglet, but for the dark, earnest eyes observing him with unnerving reservations.

'Is this little boy to your satisfaction?' the matron asked.

Like an insecure adolescent, he was too concerned with his poise to realise fully the finality of his words when he answered, 'Certainly, he will do splendidly,' and handed the child back to the wet-nurse.

The matron took him down to her office, where he had to sign the required statement that the infant child Billy Monday, of unknown parentage, found on the steps of the Kendal foundling

house on the morning of the fourteenth of September in the year of our Lord sixteen hundred fifty-two at the estimated age of three days, was as of this date handed over into his care, and that he accepted all the duties and obligations as described by law for a child's guardian. Meanwhile the infant was swaddled by the wet-nurse into a tight little bundle ready for transportation, and he was given a comforter to stick in the child's mouth should it start to scream. The wet-nurse was the one who handed the child up to him after he had hoisted himself arthritically into the saddle. He took the bundle from her and put it awkwardly in the crook of his left arm, convinced that he could not keep this up for more than a few minutes. He was eager to get away from the matron's pious smirk and the small crowd of urchins that had gathered around them, drinking in the fascinating spectacle of a rich old man in modish clothes setting out on horseback with a foundling. His nervousness must have communicated itself to his horse, normally docile and placid, for the moment he spurred her she started to prance skittishly, frightened by the scraping noise made by her hoofs on the cobblestones. He clutched the baby frantically to prevent himself from dropping it before they had even started; the child began to howl with fright, like a tomcat on the prowl. The wet-nurse cried, 'Give him the comforter, good sir! The comforter!' She obviously did not grasp the fact that a man had only two hands, and that to keep the horse from bolting he needed a tight hold on the reins. So he clattered, shied and skidded down the street, clutching the squalling bundle; the frantic screams of the child and the panicky clatter of his horse's hoofs echoed between the houses.

When finally he reached the open field outside the town, out of sight of the slack-jawed people of Kendal, he was exhausted and desperate. The child still screamed with high, piercing shrieks, each of them ending in a strangulated gurgle that made him fear for its life. Once he had the horse under control he stopped by the wayside for a moment, pulled the comforter out of the pocket of his coat and stuck it in the gaping mouth of the little creature, which at that moment looked, with its tightly closed eyes and its huge red orifice, like some ghoulish unknown fish gasping its last. He felt the insane temptation to throw the fish back into the sea and to flee, lashing his horse; but the comforter worked. The little monster clamped his toothless jaws on it the moment it touched his tongue; from then on, his entire attention was concentrated on sucking it frantically, making the same grunting,

wheezing noises the two piglets had made at the woman's huge, veined breasts.

By the time they reached the forest, the child had fallen asleep, the comforter in its mouth. The wind increased; the swirling leaves rising in his path like dancing ghosts set his horse prancing all over the place again. He entered the writhing, hissing wood with a prayer.

He would be unable to relax sufficiently to think straight before he got home, and maybe that was a blessing in disguise. He had no wish to contemplate the future or regret the past, or to reflect on how little time it had taken him to become a father and ruin his life.

* * *

When Bonbon first heard the high, thin cries outside the kitchen, he thought it was a cats' tryst. Then the thought struck him that maybe a fox or a badger had got hold of *Madame*'s little dog, in which case there would be the devil to pay. He opened the top half of the door and peered myopically into the twilit garden. The cries had ceased; he called anxiously, 'Froufrou? . . . *Viens! Viens, cocotte!* . . . Froufrou?' Suddenly there were footsteps and someone came up the garden path; only as the vague shape stepped into the light did he recognise the master. '*Ah! Bonsoir, mon Colonel!*' he exclaimed ingratiatingly; but the boor barely acknowledged his greeting. Bonbon opened the lower half of the door for him, wondering what was the matter with the man, he looked so flustered and shifty. 'Shall I call Benjamin to put your horse away, *mon Colonel*?'

'No, thank you. I've already done that. Is *Madame* home yet?'

'*Non, mon Colonel*. But she will come any moment.'

'All right. Bring me some cheese and mustard in the little drawing-room. And tell her she can find me there when she comes.'

'Very well, *mon Colonel*.'

There could be no doubt: the man had been up to no good. The fact that he had ridden off alone that morning had been unusual enough; for him to unsaddle and stable his horse himself made the whole thing highly suspect. What had the old *satyre* been up to, to feel the need for all this subterfuge? Did he have a wench somewhere? Most probably. But then why put his horse away himself? It could hardly be expected to be smelling of

perfume, even if he had bedded down in a *partouse* with a brace of wenches doused with cheap *odeur*. Had he been out plotting with the Quakers? In that case, Justice Sawrey would be interested to hear about it.

There were ways of finding out these things; he would have a good look at the old goat's clothes when they came down to be pressed and a good sniff at his drawers. Sooner or later he would know; it all added to the foothold of power, so propitiously started with the business about the poacher. Ever since the trial, the vision of himself and La Douce Tété going back to France together to spend their old age in fond remembrance of the past had changed from a cranky pipe dream into a distinct possibility, as long as he did not let himself be tricked into hasty action and possessed the patience to bide his time, like a cat dozing beside a mousehole in the knowledge that, sooner or later, the little villain has to come out.

He took a plate of cheese to the little drawing-room, where he knew the old *imbécile* would be slouching in his chair, boots on the table, guzzling wine; he was halfway across the hall when he heard excited voices at the front door. It was thrown open and there were those strange, high-pitched cries again, as of a little animal in terror or pain, and there was *Madame* stumbling into the house with eyes like saucers, her wig awry, carrying a bundle, crying, 'William! Kathryn! Quick!' and, seeing him, 'Bonbon! Go and fetch the master, quickly! Call Kathryn! Somebody put a child under our hedge! He may be dying!'

He stood, mouth open, thunderstruck, but there were those cries again, they clearly came from the bundle she carried in her arms. There could be no mistake; she had picked up a child.

The next few minutes were so chaotic that Bonbon did not get a chance to think. *Madame* cried orders at him for warm milk, a blanket, brandy, towels, a sugar pot; Kathryn came wheezing and jellying down the stairs and contributed squeals to the confusion before hopping towards the screaming little bundle in her mistress' arms like an overweight toad. In her turn, she started shouting orders at him for milk, hot water, brandy, towels; then the master came out of the drawing-room, bellowing, 'What in the name of sanity is going on here?' A natural reaction for a man who had been imbibing restorative wine after a gallant adventure which, at his age, must have left him cross-eyed with exertion; but although the sound was right, and the words were, too, he

shot a shifty glance at Bonbon, standing there with the plate of cheese, watching him like a lynx.

Despite the confusion, the sudden frenzied activity, Bonbon realised with a giddying sense of satisfaction that of course it was the Colonel who had put the child on the doorstep. That was why he had unsaddled and stabled his horse himself! As he went for milk, brandy, spoon, towel, boiled water, prepared a washing basin — all the thousand and one things the women went on shrieking for while fussing over the child — Bonbon asked himself: why? Why had the man done it? Who was the child? Why had he arranged it so his wife would be the one to find it? There could be only one solution: the child was his own little bastard, the outcome of a dalliance with some girl, not in Ulverston but half a day's ride away; he was trying to smuggle it into his house as a foundling!

At that thought, Bonbon, with a sudden sense of alarm, stopped what he was doing. If she were to keep it, if she were to accept the child as a foundling and fall for the preposterous lure out of over-age motherly instinct, that would be the end of the dream of taking her back to France and spending their last years together. Whatever happened, he must prevent this; but it would need all his wiles, patience and nerve. All of a sudden, he found himself fighting for his life.

He managed to suppress the trembling of his knees, ignore the pounding of his heart and the sick, dry taste of panic; he kept his wits sufficiently about him to snatch the milk off the stove before it boiled over. He was about to go back to the hall with a tray piled high when the kitchen door was thrown open and Kathryn banged in, carrying *Madame*'s little dog. 'Here,' she said gruffly, 'you take this hopeless animal; the mere sight of the baby sends it into a fit.' She put the little dog, whimpering piteously, on the kitchen table, then snarled, 'Give here! This is a woman's job! Stay in the kitchen and keep that dog quiet. There is enough fuss as it is!' grabbed his tray and breezed out of the kitchen, back to the hall.

He slammed the door behind her, glowered at it, fists clenched, hissing, '*Serpent! Suceuse de sang! Sale vache vénérique!*' He turned to the table, shaking like a leaf, and found little Froufrou standing there, trembling, eyes bulging with terror, whimpering with a voice that sounded more human than the shrieks of the child. Although he had never liked the little bitch, he now took the quivering body in his arms, patted her modishly coiffed, brain-

less little head and whispered, '*Tais-toi, tais-toi, mon petit chouchou* ... We'll get home, don't you worry. We'll get home, somehow, soon.'

He gave her what was left of the baby's milk on a saucer, in front of the stove. He coaxed her, with coos and kissing noises, until she drank; but it did not cure her trembling. She lapped at the milk apathetically, looked up at him with those big round eyes as if in abject apology, staggered a few steps and vomited on the floor.

The tiny beast's action seemed to sum up the outrageousness of what had happened that night. It suddenly seemed impossible to let it go on one minute longer; whatever the Colonel's purpose might be in foisting an infant on his poor wife with such despicable subterfuge, he should not be allowed to get away with it, not one second longer.

Without giving himself time to think, obsessed only by the notion that he had to save her life and his own, now, *now*, he rushed out of the kitchen, leaving everything as it was: the vomit on the floor, the mess on the table, the little dog whimpering in front of the stove. He burst into the hall, no longer master of himself, and shrieked, insane with hatred, '*He* did it! *He* put the child under the hedge! *He* brought it here on his horse! I saw him! I saw him! It's his bastard! It's *his*, it's *his*!'

For a moment they all stood still, as if petrified: *Madame* bent over the yowling baby, the *Colonel* stopped in mid-stride on his way to the child with a towel.

The first thought that came to Bonbon out of that eerie moment of stillness was: 'Take it back, God, dear God, let me take it back!' He knew with sudden, chilling lucidity that it had been wrong to do this, that instead of saving her and himself for that dream of shared old age in France, their France, he had in one split second of madness sealed his own doom.

So strong was that certainty, so irrefutable the knowledge, that he could not bear it. With a cry, half sob, half wail, like the last cry of a soldier gored by a sword, he turned around and ran back to the kitchen, out the door and, wildly, into the night.

* * *

Henrietta Best's first reaction was one of icy calm. 'Thou hadst better go after him,' she said to Kathryn, who stood gaping at the door through which the mad old man had vanished. When the maid seemed about to protest, Henrietta added, with an edge to

her voice that carried a warning, 'Don't worry about the child, I am perfectly able to take care of it. Go and do as I tell thee.' Then she turned to her husband, who was still standing where Bonbon's shrieked denunciation had stopped him. One look at his face and she knew that it was true: he had put it under the hedge himself. Her first thought was, 'Don't panic, don't panic,' for she was overwhelmed by a sickening fear: a younger woman, a son — her whole world of love and tenderness had been a delusion. The child on the table screamed, screamed; she suddenly could stand it no longer and went to pick it up, without really knowing what she intended to do with it: put it outside, or hand it to him, or shake it and scream, 'Shut up! Shut up!' But the moment she lifted it, its smallness, its pathetic vulnerability were so heartbreaking that she took it in her arms and cradled it, kissing its little face, whispering, '*Allons, allons, ne t'en fais pas ... ne t'en fais pas ... Allons, t'es beau ... T'es un grand gosse ...*'

She heard her husband behind her say, with awkward self-consciousness, 'Here — take this. They gave me this to stick in its mouth. It's the only thing that works ...' But as if the little mite understood every word of her silly French baby-talk, it fell silent and opened its eyes for the first time since its arrival, to find out who was holding it.

It gave her back her composure, and she turned around to face her husband. Her eye was caught by his hand, dangling by his side, holding the comforter; she noticed it was trembling. How shattered he must be, a sad old man caught up in his own pathetic folly. She was overcome by pity and the sudden desire to help him. 'Well,' she said, with a self-confidence that was not really her own but had been given her by the baby, 'I suppose we had better have a little talk, hadn't we? Shall we go to my room?'

He looked at her with the face she knew so well, the hangdog face of a little boy found with his hand in the honey jar, and it made her feel infinitely sad that this was what life had done to him, who only yesterday had been so bold, so dashing, such a wonderful, vital man. Then he said, with an odd, searching look in his eyes, 'Thou dost not by chance believe that it is mine, dost thou?'

'Well — whose is it?'

'God knows. A foundling. I picked him up this afternoon in Kendal.'

'He is not thy child?'

'Don't be ridiculous! He is nobody's.'

'*Mais* — I do not understand . . .'

'I put him out there in the hope that thou wouldst be moved to make him thine.'

'But why?'

'To keep thee from throwing thyself off the cliff! It was a desperate measure, but I considered it to be a desperate situation.'

She gazed at him uncomprehendingly. 'Cliff?'

'I thought I had set thee free by banishing that madman!' he cried, with a sudden vehemence that made her press the baby closer to her. 'I did not expect thee of thy own volition to throw thyself into the pit of the past!'

'Pit . . .?'

Her lack of comprehension exasperated him; he glared at her and shouted, 'By joining that madwoman on the hill! After all that went before! I thought I had managed to exorcise those ghosts, to bring thee back to life! But that foul knave who poisoned the town and turned Tom Fell's entire household into a bunch of raving maniacs has managed to get hold of thee too!' He threw down the comforter. 'That devil's bastard! I should have let the priests hang him! Instead of which, God help me, I not only risked my money and my liberty, but got myself an infant to boot!' He slammed his forehead with frightening force, hurting himself in his powerless fury. 'If I had him here, I would disembowel the swine! Throttle him in his own bloody guts! If I had him here I would — I would — '

She managed to interject quickly because of the baby, '*Mais, mon cher*, thou dost not have him here! Thou has me here, and I love thee, and I am all right, I swear to thee I am all right.'

'Oh, I know thee!' he cried, refusing to listen in his rage. 'I've been married to thee for thirteen years! And now, after thirteen years, here comes a charlatan, a blasphemous scoundrel — '

'*Chéri*, thou art distressing thyself foolishly,' she said, trying to calm both him and the child. But the child did not need calming, it did not seem at all disturbed by his shouts or his fury. It lay in her arms contentedly, asleep, she thought; but as she glanced down she saw two dark eyes contemplating her from below, solemnly.

'Oh, what's the use?' he cried. 'It's all spoiled, thanks to that

gelded toad! I'll take the child back to Kendal tomorrow. Let's put it in the basket and go to bed.'

'*Mon cher*,' she said with tenderness, 'we will go to my room and talk things over. Yes?' He grunted. 'Before we go, let me tell thee that thou art the most wonderful, most gallant, most loving husband any woman could wish herself.' He started to move towards the door. 'I mean it,' she continued, following him, carrying the child. 'I don't know any man who would have done this, just to save his wife from — from a danger which he considered to be very real, even though I must confess to thee it is not — not any more.'

He stood still, looked at her quizzically, then he opened the door. She passed him to enter the little room where they had spent so many hours, happy and sad ones, in the intimacy of their childless marriage. She wondered, as she sat down cautiously with the baby, how long it was since a child had been in this room.

He closed the door. 'I wish I could believe that,' he said.

'It is true! I can write those letters and help send those parcels without being bothered by the past. I have always known that I would have to come to terms with it someday. To hush it up as if it had never happened, as we did for so many years, just kept it right below the surface, to fly at my throat at the slightest provocation. Like that boy screaming in the kitchen. I didn't know it, but I was not really alive. I don't mean, *chéri*, that our life and our love haven't been real to me, of course they have. But by refusing to face the past, I stopped my life from going forward. I don't know how to put it, but writing those letters to those people in prison has set me free.'

'Free?'

'Yes, free. Until yesterday my first husband and . . . and my children seemed to have died in vain. I could not think of them, because there was no way in which their suffering and their death could possibly make any sense.' It was the first time she had mentioned her children, apart from the desperate night when she had screamed at George Fox. She clutched the baby tightly; the feel of that little body somehow gave her a sense of security, after twenty-four years of pretending her children had never existed.

He went to the cupboard and poured himself a glass of wine.

'It is thou, really, who gave me the strength to face the past,'

she said impulsively. 'The knowledge of thy love for me made me dare do it.'

He shook his head, took a draught of his wine and rinsed his mouth.

'What wouldst thou have done, had we decided to keep the child?' she asked casually.

'Oh, I don't know,' he replied morosely. 'Gone hunting, taken up horse-breeding ... I would have found something to do.'

'But, *mon cher*!' She laughed. 'A baby in the house would not turn thee into a widower! We would have taken a wet-nurse, and another maid for the child, although I am sure Kathryn would be able to cope perfectly. Just the thing she has needed, poor old maid. I have been worrying about her these last months. She is getting terribly moody; a bit of a problem, really.'

'Well, I mean: hunting and horse-breeding until he would be old enough to join me.' He swallowed the rest of his wine.

'What would have troubled me is the child himself,' she confessed.

'In what way?'

'The fact that he counts for so little in all this. As a person, I mean. We have been rather high-handed about him, haven't we?'

'I have been troubled by that myself. Something Fox said during the trial, believe it or not.'

The baby seemed to be getting sleepy at last, maybe because she was gently rocking him. 'Did they give him a name?'

'Who?'

'Him. They must have called him something in the home?'

'Oh, Billy. Billy Monday — the day he was found. They must be hard put to find names for the little brutes.'

'Billy ...' She looked at the drowsy little face. The dark, probing eyes were closed now; it gave him a look of trust and innocence.

'Dear heart,' her husband said suddenly, 'if that is what thou art considering, we had better talk about it.'

She looked up, nonplussed. 'What?'

'Keeping the child.'

'Oh, *bon Dieu*!' she exclaimed, suddenly nervous. She needed time to think, to weigh the consequences, before being pinned down to such an irrevocable decision.

'Well?'

'I don't know! Let us not discuss it. Not yet.'

He looked at her, hid his nose in his glass again; then he said, 'By the way, there is one thing I should mention. We cannot keep Bonbon, in any event.'

She had expected this, ever since poor Bonbon's hysterical accusation. It was another situation, like the baby, that she wanted to approach at her ease, alone. 'Can't we wait?' she asked.

'I'm afraid not. Not because of myself, although after what happened tonight I am not looking forward to having his razor on my throat tomorrow morning.'

'But where could he go, at his age?'

'Don't worry. I will see to it that he has no financial worries. But he cannot stay with us, after this. For his own sake. He will be much happier in France, among his own people.'

'But he has no people of his own!' she pleaded, overwhelmed by melancholy at the thought of the poor, warped old man all by himself in Paris. 'All he has is me!'

He looked at her with tenderness and understanding. 'No, my dear, he does not have thee any longer. I don't know what did it, but the ghost of La Douce Tété has been laid to rest today. Maybe even that of Henriette de Coligny.'

'But then, who am I?' she cried.

'Henrietta Best, wife of William Best,' he answered calmly. 'Mother of William Best the second, if thou so desirest.'

Tears welled into her eyes and she quickly bent over the sleeping child. 'God,' she said, 'how difficult life is! How confusing!'

But she did not stop rocking him. He lay there, asleep, peaceful and secure, mysteriously reassured.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'Well, what do we do?' Henrietta Best asked calmly. 'I don't know,' Margaret Fell replied. 'I honestly don't know.' She walked, heavy with child, over to the window. It was a bright, almost blinding day; the sunlight's reflection from the snow outside made the little office seem lighter than at any other time. How peaceful the frozen garden looked, how pristine! Suddenly

the child within her gave a violent series of kicks; she sat down clumsily on the window seat.

'Margaret . . .' Henrietta Best was by her side in a flash. 'Art thou all right?'

'Oh, yes, quite all right . . .' She smiled, it could not look very convincing. 'Our little friend is rather restless this morning. Oh! These last months are always the most difficult; nine is about two too many.'

'Think of the elephant,' Henrietta Best said. 'She has to carry her young for a year, and it has a trunk as well as four legs.'

'Well, by the feel of it, that's what I'm about to give birth to.' There was a silence, in which she gazed into the garden, her mind a blank.

'Well?' Henrietta's persistent voice asked, behind her. 'What do we do? We have to do *something*.'

'Yes, I suppose so.' She sighed. Infernal mess, that's what it was. 'Honestly, I think only George can answer those questions. I can be vague and generally pious in my letters, thou canst be jolly and down to earth, but when it comes to theology . . .'

'Where is he? Didst thou ask him to come?'

'I have asked him to come several times,' she replied dispassionately. 'For some reason, the young man prefers to ignore our pleas.'

'But isn't he curious as to what we're doing? He must realise by now that — well, that we are providing him with an organisation.'

'Maybe that's the trouble,' she said. 'Maybe he doesn't want an organisation. Maybe all he wants is to hop about like a grasshopper, bringing people to the Light, or whatever he calls it, and letting them fend for themselves.'

'In that case, he may find himself overtaken by the monster he has created.'

Margaret smiled. 'The monster being me?'

Henrietta Best gave her a knowing look. 'Thou must admit that without thee there would be no monster.'

'Well . . .' She did not like this turn in the conversation. 'For lack of a word from George, we'll have to make up our own Quakerism as we go along. Where is the first letter?'

Henrietta Best looked at the sheaf of papers she had brought in. 'This is from a young soldier in prison in Newcastle for refusal to bear arms. His family has raked together the money to buy a replacement. He asks whether it is all right to let someone

else bear arms for him, or whether this is against the peace testimony. He also shares a cell with members of other sects, to a total of fifteen, which he lists as Lollards, Anabaptists, Muggletonians, Sabbatarians, Ranters and Fifth Monarchy men, whatever *that* may mean. He has shared the contents of his parcel with them and also thy letter. Now they all want to know more about the children of the Light: what they stand for, what their dogmas and principles are. But, frankly, I think the operative question is the last one: what must they do to become eligible for a monthly parcel? Why not tell them to "mind the Light" and send each of them a pair of socks?'

'That would scarcely be sufficient.'

'Oh, I don't know. I found that theological differences become rather blunted in prison. In my case . . .' She did not finish.

Obviously, she still could not talk about it, poor woman. It was really wonderful, the way she had taken this on. Her little boy must give her the strength; ever since that foundling had arrived she seemed to have acquired another dimension. 'Well, dear Henrietta, if thou dost feel that thou canst answer those questions satisfactorily, do so.'

'Is that really all right? For me to start laying about me with theology?'

'Why not? We are in this together.'

'*Certainement*. But, my dear, I am not a Quaker. I'm not even religious. I'm just an attender, helping out until thy little elephant is born.'

'Well, I'll be content to let thee answer whatever thou seest fit. What's the next one?'

'Let me see . . . Ah, yes. This one is a little tricky, I would say. It is not from a prisoner but from a woman clerk of a newly formed Meeting in Little Rostock. Do we know where Little Rostock is?'

'Isn't it somewhere in County Durham?'

'I do not know. Anyhow, she writes: "*Some women members have run into notions after George Fox left. Some have taken to running through the streets, hair loose, breasts bared, shouting exhortations. Others talk in unknown tongues to priests and magistrates. One of the women stripped off her clothes, smeared herself with excrement and ran into church during a sermon, shouting that God wanted them to smell for themselves the corruption of their souls.*" That sounds like quite a circus, doesn't it?'

'Oh dear, oh dear — that's what Mabby did.'

'Pardon?'

'What does she want of me? What can I do?'

'Oh, I don't know. She obviously had to unburden herself to someone. I don't blame her.'

'What wouldst thou say?'

'I?' Henrietta Best smiled. '*Paul says this, Peter says that, but what dost thou say?* All right. What would I say? It's a bit late to douse her with water.'

'That's what we did.'

'Pardon?'

'That's what Thomas Woodhouse did when Mabby and Harry Martin were up to the same sort of thing in the courtyard.'

'And did it work?'

'They were children. Someone could take them by the ear and bring them to their senses. I'm afraid that the women running through the streets with their breasts bared, as well as our smelly Friend, are beyond the reach of authority.'

'Even their husbands'?'

'Perhaps.'

'Thou art right. They wouldn't have started running in the first place had their emotional needs been satisfied.'

Margaret frowned. 'The only person to help them would be George himself. But that he is not prepared to do. He's probably miles away from there by now.'

There was a silence, with an edge of discomfort.

'Well,' Henrietta Best said, 'why not send this letter on to him? Let him deal with it, for a change. And let us inform the clerk that we have done so. That would take care of it, at least for the time being.'

'I suppose so . . .' A sense of despondency had settled over her. It was more than one of the frequent changes of mood that went with her condition. There was a deeper cause: even her appropriating his religious movement had not prevailed upon him to come back.

'Here is another one that I think thou shouldst know about,' Henrietta Best resumed. 'It's from one Obadiah Foot, clerk of a Meeting in Yorkshire. "*Dear Friend. Two young men in our Meeting, inspired by a miraculous healing performed by George Fox here during his recent visit, held up the burial of a dead relative in order that they might minister to the corpse, exhorting*

it to get up and walk. After three days, the ministry being unsuccessful, the body was forcibly removed by the sheriff because it had become offensive. The Meeting is desirous to know what steps to take, if any, should a similar occasion arise. What miraculous powers can be expected of us, children of the Light? Some among us feel that the young men in question ran into notions; others that the sheriff lacked faith. Please advise us. Thine in love, Obadiah Foot." '

'Oh dear, oh dear . . .' She tried to rise, but her belly seemed to weigh a ton. And the child was quiet just now, maybe she had better keep it that way.

'Can I get thee anything?' Henrietta asked, concerned.

'No, thank thee. I'm all right. Oh, I really don't know. Just put it aside. I'll think about it. Are there many more?'

'Yes, quite a stack. But I can answer most of them. There are just a few that thou wilt have to see.

'Well, let's have one more; then maybe we could have some tea.'

'*Eh bien*, let me see . . . Here. This is a real challenge. A Friend in Liverpool jail by the name of Harry Moore. He does not mention his age; my guess is that he is very young. His question is as follows. "*My jailer often lays violent hands on my person, but the Light tells me to approach him in a spirit of love. The only way in which I can show love is by embracing him each time he comes into the cell.*" '

'Oh, no!'

'Listen! "*The jailer rebuked me more violently each time and he has now stated that if I do this filthy thing once more he will crown me with the pan of soup. I am prepared to suffer this and to steadfastly continue my testimony. But what if he were to end by killing me? Would I have turned him into a murderer? Would his fall from grace weigh upon my soul?*" '

'That is ridiculous!' Margaret exclaimed.

'Apart from that, what do we say to the boy?'

She sighed, her head in her hands. 'I don't know, Henrietta, I honestly don't know. What wouldst thou suggest?'

'Truly?'

'Yes, please: what *wouldst* thou say?'

'My answer,' Henrietta Best replied matter-of-factly, 'would be: "Thou are in error, beloved Friend, when calling this a motion of love. It is a motion of brittleness" — this I find a useful word. "Whatever anyone may say, thou shouldst not do unto

others as thou wouldst have them do unto thee before having made certain that your tastes are the same." '

Margaret frowned. 'George would be horrified if he were to read that.'

'*Eh bien!* Isn't it time he was? Let me write that and send George Fox a copy. My guess is he'll descend upon this house like a bolt from heaven.' She paused. 'Would that not please thee?'

'Yes, but —'

'All right, I'll take care of it. Shall I ask for tea now?'

'But I'm not sure —'

'Of course thou art sure. This is ridiculous, Margaret. Thou art not a theologian, neither am I. We are women, moved in our emotional way by other people's suffering. That is the only concept of Quakerism I will accept. I have no time, no patience and certainly no taste for men trying to raise the dead, frustrated women smearing themselves with excrement or youths kissing their jailers. That is not religion to me. Nor, I am sure, to any real saint, for that matter.'

'Is there such a thing as a real saint?'

'Probably. But, in my experience at least, there is one quality they all share: they have a sense of humour. I would even say they are mischievous. The one thing that betrays the false saint is self-importance, the incapacity to laugh at himself. Then, of course, there is the ultimate test: what do they do? Not what do they say; what do they *do*? And that's a question I will leave thee to answer for thyself in the case of our feathered friend.'

'Who's that?' she asked primly.

Henrietta broke into a smile. '*Voyons donc!*' She sat down beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. 'He is, *ma chère*, a superb specimen. But there is only one person he can ever truly love: himself.'

'That is not so!'

'No, thou art right: and mankind.' Henrietta's motherly hug made Margaret almost burst into tears; that was the damnable thing about pregnancy: one was always so emotional. 'When is thy husband due back?'

'He should be here for my lying in. But not before, I suppose.'

'Well, that's not long now.'

'Henrietta . . .' She held her back as she was about to rise.

'Yes, *ma chère*?'

'Do not send that letter, please.'

The older woman gave her a searching look. 'Dost thou not want him brought hither?'

'Not by those means. Not by ridiculing the Sermon on the Mount. It seems so — so unworthy. And it would really hurt him, deeply.'

Henrietta smiled. '*Ma pauvre amie*, thou art too delicate. Thou art not dealing with a delicate man. People like him do not react to delicate hints, only to red rags.'

'That is why. That letter is a red rag and nothing more.'

'I do not agree.' Henrietta rose and went to the door. Halfway, she turned around. 'Margaret, I do not say this readily, but I have been in prison myself. There is one thing we owe those people: the truth. The truth is not always what they want to hear, but to be evasive or fanciful with them is to exploit their misery for our own emotional satisfaction. And one thing George Fox said makes good sense to me: never use a man as a means, always as an end. That is what we should tell our kissing Quaker.'

'Well, tell him that. But not the other thing.'

'In that case: write the letter thyself. If I do it, I should be allowed to tell that boy the truth as I see it. At least, my advice will be based on experience.'

She left. Margaret stared morosely out at the snow. Why not allow her to write that? She was right, it might indeed bring George back. So why not?

Maybe it was the pregnancy, but something had changed. She no longer wanted him at all costs. Whether it was the burden of a new life or something else, she found herself stricken with an inarticulate, indiscriminate gentleness. It was as if that of God in her were about her all the time. That of God. '*No, no, not like thy stomach, more like thy unborn children.*'

She wished it were true! If only that of God were as self-assertive as the little wrestler in her belly! Like most things George said, it was true enough; but somehow it seemed to lack experience. It had an element of abstraction, of theory. Yet, look at Henrietta Best! Would she have changed from a frightened recluse into this charming, forceful woman without having been touched by George in passing? He had done the same to all of them: awakened them and set them free.

Maybe she should allow Henrietta to mind her own inner Light. But in that case she had better warn her to seek refuge on top of the cupboard the moment he came charging down upon

them, maddened by the red rag. Poor George, how simple his life would be without women!

Suddenly she did not trust this amused resignation of hers. Pregnant or not, she was the same old Maggie who had captured the judge, doubled his estate, ruled the town of Ulverston, chased George Fox over the hill. Should she let someone else wave that red rag for her?

'Oh, Maggie, Maggie,' she thought wearily. 'What slyness are thou up to now?'

* * *

George Fox received the packet of letters in Liverpool when he touched base at The Mermaid on arrival. A note from Margaret Fell went with it.

'Dear Heart, I am sorry to burden thee with this errand, but wouldst thou hand these to the warden of Liverpool jail to be distributed to the Friends imprisoned there for Truth's sake? I would rather they be handed to him by thee than trust the postillion. Art thou well? Let us hear from thee when thou canst find the time. Our labours are richly blessed: over one hundred letters every two weeks, and the same amount of parcels every other month. We are doing our best to interpret to those in prison the essence of thy message, realising all along that we are but pale moons reflecting the light of thy sun. Keep warm, the winter here is severe. We often pray for thee and think of thee always as we gather in front of the big fire in the hall to have meeting twice a day. Thou art sorely missed, especially by thy old friend: M.F.'

He read through the letters that evening, lying on his bed in the inn. He had been vaguely unhappy about the women's frenetic correspondence for some time. The few letters he had seen seemed faithful enough to the truth, yet there had been an element of housewifely pragmatism in them that seemed to reduce the fierce glory of the Presence to something prosaic, almost pedestrian. To be in prison for truth's sake was a witness, a testimony, not an affliction like a cold or the flux. Yet they wrote to their correspondents almost as if it were; especially that Frenchwoman, whose letters were full of practical advice on how to avoid constipation how important regular hours of sleep were, especially in the perpetual dusk of the dungeons, if they wanted to safeguard their sanity. Was sanity that important? Was it not God's will that His children should turn their suffering into a

blinding beacon for all the world to see? He had been in prison himself, he had never been troubled by such things. What had bothered him was not constipation or lack of sleep but how to keep the awareness of the Presence alive, how to nourish the inner Light with prayers and meditation.

Reading this new batch of correspondence from the busybodies in Swarthmoor Hall did nothing to lift his spirits, which had been low ever since his visit to London. The encounter with Cromwell had gone well; his arrival had obviously been planned by the Lord, for just at that time the accusation had been planted in Cromwell's ear that the Quakers had formed a secret alliance with the Cavaliers and were planning an armed insurrection. He had been able to dispel that fable at once; the audience had been very successful altogether. When they parted Cromwell had said, with tears in his eyes, 'Come again to my house, for if thou and I were but an hour in a day together we should be nearer one to the other.' Stirring words, and he did not doubt that, had it been up to Cromwell, they would have done just that. But it had proved impossible to get to him without going through Lord Shorwell, the Master of Requests, who was of a different breed. He was charming, effusive, chatting about his good friend Fell, but after that one visit, despite the tears in Cromwell's eyes, he had been terribly busy each day, unable to receive George Fox, who had written a note in the end, asking Friend Oliver to take that watchdog away from his door. But he received no reply; obviously Shorwell took care of written requests also. He had considered returning but the Light had not guided him so far. Morosely, he had hovered around London for weeks, despite the plague; then he had given up and taken to the road again.

But something of the fire, the zest had gone out of him. It was probably temporary; it might have to do with the winter, which was particularly harsh this year and had frozen not only the roads and the rivers but also, it appeared. the sea of the children of the Light. There had been a new dubiousness among Friends, a questioning spirit that had not been there before. In earlier days the fire, the enthusiasm, the ecstasy whenever the power of the Lord thundered among them had swept people off their feet, caused them to witness loudly, regardless of the consequences. Now a spirit of caution had arisen; he could not be sure, but he suspected that the women in Swarthmoor had something to do with it. There could be no doubt that their operation ran

smoothly; there was not a Friend in prison anywhere in the land who did not, in a surprisingly short time after his incarceration, receive his first parcel of socks, muffler, candles, weevil-proof biscuits, a Bible, a list of do's and dont's for prisoners, a jar of prunes against constipation and a letter exhorting him to be steadfast in the truth and to organise silent meetings with the inmates of his cell forthwith, as this would fortify and inspire all, especially himself. The letter contained a phrase that summed up the attitude of the women: '*It is a well-known fact that the person most likely to survive the hardships of being adrift in an open boat on the high seas is the one who appoints himself its captain.*' Now, what kind of spirit was that? Who told those women that survival was the primary goal of a man incarcerated for his beliefs? It was a spirit of pragmatism, of denying that of God in favour of a daily bowel movement and feet with chilblains. And where had the women garnered the questionable information about shipboard life? It smacked of a housewife's musings by the fire, imagining herself at sea.

He read through the new batch of letters, dropping them on the coverlet as he finished them; suddenly he came upon something that made him rear up in fury.

He did not even stay the night; he set out for Ulverston at once.

It took a night and a day before he arrived at Swarthmoor, at ten o'clock in the morning, after a hair-raising race with the incoming tide.

He entered the hall in the power of the Lord, giddy with exhaustion, as if he had set foot ashore, after a stormy crossing of the Irish Sea. When he saw the long tables covered with boxes, the rows of women making up packages, he felt like overturning those tables and chasing the women just as Christ had chased the money-changers from the temple. He had come unannounced, and they welcomed him with cries of surprise and elation. But he brushed them aside and asked grimly, 'Where is Margaret Fell?'

She was in her little office, writing at her desk. On the floor sat Ann Traylor, playing with a little black-haired boy; on the window seat sat the Frenchwoman, reading. She was the first to see him. '*Mon Dieu!* Look who's here!' she cried in a tone that was in marked contrast with the squeals of delight with which the others had welcomed him.

Margaret Fell turned around and peered at the doorway over her spectacles. At the sight of him she hastily took them off and put them under some papers. 'George!' It was gratifying to see her imperiousness wither in his presence. It was not he, it was not he; as a man he would be utterly powerless to do anything; it was the Lord in whose love and power he spoke.

'Good day to thee, Margaret Fell,' he said sternly. 'I must have a serious discourse with thee. I am disturbed to find that thou and thy household seem to have run into notions.'

She looked at him as if she could not believe her ears. 'Notions?'

'Close the door and I will tell thee.' Ann Traylor did so, then retired to a corner of the room with the child instead of leaving, as he would have preferred her to do. 'Let me begin with the cause for my return,' he said, taking a letter from his breast pocket. 'This is a letter sent by Henrietta Best to a Friend imprisoned in Liverpool.' He read slowly, his voice charged with indignation, ' "*As to thy question whether to continue embracing thy jailer: do not do unto others as thou wouldst have them do unto thee unless thou art sure that your tastes are the same.*" ' He turned to the woman on the window seat. 'Was this written by thee, Henrietta Best —'

The woman, whom he last remembered as breaking down in sobs with her head on his shoulder, looked at him coldly. 'Why, yes.'

'Who authorised thee to rewrite the Scriptures?'

'But, George . . .' Margaret started.

The woman in the window silenced her with a gesture. 'Am I to understand, George Fox, that thou considerest it better to affront a man by embracing him than to understand him and seek another way to express one's feelings?'

'That is not the issue. It is the terms in which thou hast couched thy advice. It is . . .' He restrained himself. 'It is not consistent with the approach to conflict after the manner of the children of the Light.'

'I do not understand.'

'To ridicule the Sermon on the Mount is an insult to the honour of God, a betrayal of the spirit of Christ.'

She looked at him with defiance. 'Friend, I have been listening to that kind of talk for a lifetime, without ever understanding what the words meant. Tell me: what should I have told him to do?'

'He should do as God tells him, mind his inner Light! If the Light tells him to go on embracing that jailer, he must do so.'

'And if the jailer goes on knocking him down, he must persevere until the day he is struck dead and turns his jailer into a murderer?'

'If that is what the Light within tells him! There are hardened hearts that cannot be convinced; John Sawrey, for instance. They are beyond saving, that of God within them is beyond liberating. In the end they are punished by God.'

'How canst thou know that?'

'It is important to me to know these things. I have kept record of them.'

The woman in the window gazed at him with astonishment. 'Thou keepest a record of thy enemies as they are punished?'

'Indeed I do,' he retorted angrily. 'I call it the Book of Rewards.'

'How are they punished?'

'According to God's will. By disease, by violence, by accidents.'

'So if John Sawrey were to be struck by a falling roof tile, thou wouldst enter it in thy book of rewards?'

'Yes.'

She said, '*Charmant!*' Then she rose and left the room.

He turned to Margaret Fell. 'Do not let this distress thee, dear friend. She will return to grace. But she should write no more letters to our prisoners.' He suddenly felt weary, his legs trembled with fatigue; no wonder, after that ride. He went to the window where the woman had been sitting and lowered himself on to the seat.

'And what would be a sign of her return to grace?' Margaret asked. 'When she starts a book of rewards of her own?'

It seemed she too had taken offence at that information. He turned to the maid in the corner. 'Forgive me, Ann,' he said. 'I would like a word with Margaret Fell in private.' The girl scowled at him. It made him feel very tired.

Margaret said, 'Pray take little William back to Henrietta Best. Ann; I will be out in a minute.' She got up and went to the door to open it for the girl. He saw to his surprise that she was heavy with child. She came back to her desk and said, 'Dear George. Forgive me for snapping at thee. I love thee for what thou art, as thou art.'

There was in her tenderness an element of female superiority

that irked him. 'Aside from all that,' he said, 'art thou going to stop thy friend writing any more letters? She must no longer be allowed to represent our movement.'

'What exactly is our movement? Before we decide who our representatives are, we must know who we are. What are our goals, our —'

'But, my dear woman!' he exclaimed. 'I have formulated that many times!'

'I know. In thy answers to the ministers at the Lancaster trial, for instance. But what those people in prison want is not a theological debate. They want something simple, straightforward, that they can explain to others in everyday words. Really, what they need is guidelines.'

'Guidelines?'

'Let me give thee an example. Two young Friends tried to revive a dead man by praying over him in the power of the Lord. They kept it up for three days and three nights.'

'I have done so myself, several times.'

'But they did not succeed. After three days the body had to be removed because it became offensive.'

'They might have succeeded had they been allowed to stay with it longer.'

'George,' she said patiently, 'I don't think it matters whether they might or might not have succeeded. What matters is that they tried to emulate thee. All they gleaned from thy message was thy power to perform miracles.'

'Thou knowest it is not I who perform miracles, it is the Lord, through me.'

'But is this the essence of thy message? That if God wills it and if the moment is right, man may suspend the laws of nature? I cannot see how the restoration of thy hand, thy crossing the sands against the tide, even thy stopping the henchmen in Derby jail from hanging that girl is in any way essential to thy message. That of God in us should be expressed in our daily conduct, not in isolated acts that suspend the laws of nature. That was why Henrietta Best was so shocked when she learned of thy Book of Rewards. The God of love, whom I always understood to be thine, would send me to the aid of a man struck by lightning, whoever he might be and whatever he might have done, rather than consider it heavenly justice and cross his name off a list.'

'Isn't it rather that thou dost not really believe in miracles?'

'Oh, I believe in them all right. I am sure the power of the

Lord can pick up a mountain and dump it somewhere else. But to what purpose? What about the innocent people on its slopes, the terrified little animals? What could be the *purpose?*'

'To show that the kingdom of God consists not of words, but of power.'

'But the whole of the universe is a demonstration of that power! There is no need for God to go on flexing His muscles!'

He looked at her musingly, then he asked, 'Dost thou know of a place called Pendle Hill?'

'Why?'

'A few nights before I came to see thee for the first time, I passed that way. I was moved by the Lord to climb it; when I came to the top and looked about me I saw that the valley and the moors were filled with people, one vast mass of people as far as the eye could reach, and I heard a voice say, "*There is a great people to be gathered.*" It convinced me that as long as we do not impose our concept of God on each other but labour together in tolerance and love, a great people will be gathered, who will live together in perfect harmony, like the animals of the peaceable kingdom described by Isaiah.'

'But the Sawreys of this world would not let them! Canst thou not see that this notion, beautiful as it is, is impractical?'

He looked at her with an odd expression, as if he were gazing at something beyond her. 'Believe me,' he said. 'It will come to pass.'

She looked at him for a moment in silence. Then she said, taking up the quill, 'Now this is something people in prison will understand. Tell me again, and I will write it down.'

He repeated it slowly. Outside, in the wintry sunlight, pigeons alighted on the window sill.

* * *

They spent the rest of that morning and all afternoon closeted in her office. Ann Traylor brought them some food on a tray; neither of them touched it. Margaret realised how exhausted she was only when, at the end of the day, a sudden faintness overcame her as she went to the door. She knew it had to do with her condition, but it alarmed him profoundly. As he stood there, supporting her, he cried in anguish: 'Henrietta! Ann Traylor! Help! Margaret Fell is not well!'

Ann Traylor came rushing in, reassured the frantic man and

took over. When at last Margaret lay gazing at the comforting shadows of the candlelight on the ceiling of the fourposter, she felt drained of all strength. She had managed to remain objective and detached all day, without allowing her own femininity to surface; now she felt all that suppressed emotion overwhelm her. She closed her eyes in prayer for strength, protection; after a moment there was a rustle and she heard a soft scratching sound. She opened her eyes and saw Ann Traylor, in a chair by her bedside, writing in an exercise book by the light of the candle.

'Ann? What art thou doing?'

The girl looked up. 'I am correcting Bonny Baker's lesson.'

She gazed at the girl in the candlelight, her strong young face, her bright, gentle eyes. Another one transformed by George's passing; only a few months ago she had been proud, headstrong and utterly self-centred. 'How is he faring?' she asked. 'Tell me.'

The girl's voice did so, cheerfully.

* * *

Ann Traylor babbled on about Bonny Baker as softly and monotonously as she could until, with a feeling of relief, she saw that her mistress had fallen asleep.

It had been a narrow escape, for what she had been writing had nothing to do with Bonny's lessons. As she sat there by the bedside, she had, on the spur of the moment, appropriated his exercise book to use as a diary. '*I hope she is asleep at last, poor woman. How is it possible that one person can make another suffer such agonies without noticing it? And that while he is holding forth about "love" and "tenderness" and "answering that of God in everyone". Considering the way he has treated Bonny and Margaret Fell, all I can say is — well, let me be charitable. The one who really stood up to him today was Mistress Best, bless her . . .*' Ann looked up to make certain that the poor, exhausted woman was indeed asleep; then she continued, '*I must confess: the sooner I get out of here, the better. If it weren't for M.F., I would have gone long ago. But she is so vulnerable, so trusting and generous, to leave her now would be to sneak away from the battlefield. Only, it is not my battle. I desire no part of it. I do not wish to end up in prison or the pillory for something I do not believe in. The only thing I believe in, as far as the present upheaval is concerned, is what Margaret Fell is doing: helping the poor people who, bewitched by Fox's rantings, find themselves in prison. It was such a spontaneous and wonderful thing*

to do that I became involved in it myself; now here I am, hanging on when I should be on my way. What way, whither? I do not know; all I know is: I desire a normal life, a simple, loving husband without fancy phrases who will be gentle and kind, a cottage with a small piece of land, some chickens, a cat, a dog; I desire children, four or five of them, who, when I am old and afraid of being alone . . .'

The quill scribbled on, with small, busy scratchings. As the stillness deepened, surreptitious noises of the night began in the house. Floorboards squeaked, mice began to rustle behind the wainscoting, while Margaret Fell drifted deeper into the dreamless sleep of exhaustion, and Ann Traylor, aged seventeen, wrote the first entry in her diary.

PART TWO

(1653)

CHAPTER ONE

THE nasty little pamphlet even looked dirty, compared to the spring day outside the study window, open to the garden. Pigeons were strutting and cooing in the first warm sunlight, a scent of honeysuckle and young grass was wafted into the room where Henrietta Best sat reading the scurrilous pages, aware that Thomas Fell was watching her intently.

'Well,' she said lightly, 'he doesn't exactly mince words, does he? I rather like his definition of us; it has a poetic flavour.'

'Pardon?'

She read aloud from the first page of the pamphlet, '"*The evil Quakers, lurking in the hills of Lancashire like butterflies.*" I like the butterflies lurking.'

'Pardon me?' He obviously was in no mood for levity.

'I think that's exactly what we are: charming, harmless and ephemeral.'

'Ah?' He brightened; she had pierced his massive gloom at last. 'Are you serious?'

'Serious about what?'

'About this — this whole thing being ephemeral?'

So that was why he had invited her to join him in his study so secretively, the day after his arrival from the circuit! He wanted to be told it was all a passing fancy which had about run its course. 'I did not mean that,' she said.

'Well, I . . .' He paused, searching for words, but could not bring himself to pronounce judgment on his wife, not even in the privacy of his own study. He looked exhausted, poor man, and no wonder. Constantly on the move, living in a string of inns all over the country, beset by anxiety about his wife and her young saint . . . She hoped he would not touch upon that subject.

'I do not believe that a single person in this house has any idea of the seriousness of the situation!' he exclaimed with startling vehemence.

'Ah?' It seemed the polite sound to make.

'This pamphlet is proof that Swarthmoor Hall has now been identified as the headquarters of the Quaker movement, and that is disastrous. Cromwell is about to issue a proclamation; I have

information as to its contents. It laments the un-Christian disturbance of church services by Quakers. It requires that all such disorderly practices shall stop; those who do not comply shall be considered disturbers of the peace; constables and judges are to proceed against them accordingly. Do you realise what that means?'

'Well — yes, I suppose so.' She did not, but his alarm began to communicate itself to her.

'It means that unless you women stop meddling in a movement that has now run out of hand, you will, all of you, find yourselves in prison. Now, is that worth the candle? Please, *Madame*, please try to dissuade her from continuing her present activities! Find her something else to do. For God's sake, find her something else!' He started to pace up and down, his hands behind his back, nervously clasping and unclasping them. She had never seen him in such a state of agitation. 'Let her raise lambs, let her start a home for foundlings . . .' He stopped abruptly and turned to her. 'I'm sorry, I did not mean to be disparaging about your son.'

'I understand,' she said blandly. 'But I'm afraid that it is a little more complicated than just finding her another diversion.' She was treading on dangerous ground, she would have to watch her step.

He shot her a glance that, maybe because of her own apprehension, looked unnervingly knowledgeable. 'Would you care to elaborate on that, *Madame*?'

'Your wife has found a field for her undeniable talent for organisation.'

'You mean, it is she who has made the movement respectable?'

It was an odd way of phrasing it, but she supposed she understood what he meant. 'If by "respectable" you mean institutionalised, yes. It was she who drew up the discipline that has now begun to pull the movement into shape. It's a remarkable document; I wonder whether you would be interested?' It was an indiscretion on her part, but she did not like the intensity with which he watched her. Anything to avoid awkward questions about his wife and young Fox. 'The whole discipline is still under discussion,' she said, picking up her writing box, which she had put by the side of her chair. 'But I happen to have a copy of her first draft.' She opened the box and took out a sheet of paper, which she held out to him. 'I hope you'll be able to read my handwriting.'

'Thank you.' He bowed before accepting the document. 'You are very kind.'

'*Pas du tout.*' She smiled, snapped the lock on her box and rose to leave. 'You'll see what the attraction is to your wife. She is a very intelligent woman.'

'You think so?' He asked it as if it were the last word to be applied to his spouse As in the case of most *cocus*, the woman he claimed as his own was only half the woman. 'May I call on you again?' He opened the door for her. There was something touching about his eagerness.

'*Mais oui*,' she said, smiling. 'It will be my pleasure. 'I'm very fond of her, you know.'

'I know,' he said. 'So, indeed, am I.' It was a stoic understatement, yet it sounded oddly pompous.

She swished away, trying not to make it look like flight. The hall was dark and chilly, the radiant day outside seemed to beckon. She put down her writing box and walked out into the garden.

Margaret Fell and baby were sitting underneath one of the old trees flushed with the tender green of spring. The nanny and the wet-nurse were squatting by her in the grass; all were laughing at the chortlings of the infant waving its little fists in its mother's face, which loomed above it like a flower of pure love. As Henrietta watched, unseen, she knew a short, unedifying moment of envy. How young she herself had been, how full of love, when her firstborn . . .

She shook off the ghosts of the past and walked on towards the sunken garden, where she had last seen Ann Traylor playing with little Will among the rosebushes.

* * *

As Thomas Fell scanned his wife's draft for a church discipline for the people called Quakers, he realised with a sinking feeling that this was the last, damning item in the case against the religious fanatics. Until recently Cromwell had considered the 'Children of the Light' a harmless nuisance; the proclamation was a reversal of that opinion, and the reason was that the Quakers had changed from a haphazard collection of innocuous hotheads into an organised, centrally controlled movement. As Thomas scanned the clauses of the discipline, there could be no doubt who was the author. There might be others involved, there no doubt were, but the main culprit for turning the

Quaker movement from a harmless irritant into a threat to the established order was his wife. He recognised her in almost every clause.

He sighed, pushed back his chair and walked over to the open window, flushing the pigeons as he approached. There she sat, surrounded by maids, the baby in her lap, a picture of domestic happiness. She had no idea of the danger, no notion of the fate that would befall her if she did not sever all connection with the doomed movement at once. Within a few days John Sawrey would receive the proclamation and the accompanying instructions to sheriffs and judges. It would give him the weapon he must have been seeking. Last time they had been able to thwart Sawrey's scheme, this time there was no hope of doing so. Whether Margaret were the wife of the Vice Chancellor or of the lowest sheepherder on the fells, there was no difference before the law.

He must stop her before it was too late. But how? How could he convince the deluded woman that she was heading for prison, and that in prison she would die? She had no idea of the reality of what she had been dealing with as a pastime all winter. She had been writing hundreds of letters to prisoners but had never seen the inside of a prison in her life. The malevolent pamphleteer had indeed furnished the perfect definition of her and her women: 'butterflies'.

What could he do to save her? He weighed various possibilities in his mind and concluded that the best way would be to let her see with her own eyes what was in store for her if she did not desist: to show her a prison, the worst prison he could find.

Well, that was not difficult. There was no worse hellhole in all of England than the dungeons of Lancaster Castle.

* * *

Thomas Fell had not often visited the dungeons himself; unlike other judges, he derived no satisfaction from viewing those he had sentenced in their misery. To walk down those dark, dank corridors again, to smell that unforgettable stench, to hear the rabid shrieks of the insane — it was a harrowing experience. His belief in the justice of imprisonment was unshaken, but it repelled him as would the sights in a slaughterhouse. It took a coarser nature than his to view with equanimity the disintegration of human beings, as did the warden who guided them on their tour. A pleasant enough man upstairs in the sunlight, a

deeply disturbing, almost salacious monster of vengeance once he descended into the purgatory of which he was the guardian.

From the moment they entered, Margaret impressed her husband by the way she retained her composure although he knew she must be profoundly disturbed by what she saw. The girl Traylor was obviously made of lesser steel than his wife; Margaret seemed to be more concerned about the distress of her young companion than about the horrors the warden showed them with such ill-concealed satisfaction. She gazed with apparent unconcern at the grimy, diseased miscreants squatting in the straw or sprawling in the stone bunks hewn out of the rock; had it not been for the pallor of her face, he would have thought she was unmoved.

Her poise finally cracked, however, when they reached the lowest level and she saw the madwomen in their cage, drooling, shrieking, dragging their chains, stumbling towards the bars at their passing and stretching out clawlike hands to grab her cloak. She stepped back with an involuntary gasp; he saw her eyes glisten as she stared at the women. When they reached the cell of the children at the far end of the passage, with the shrieks and howls of the insane still ringing in their ears, she made an involuntary gesture of horror at the sight of five or six little creatures huddled together in the filthy straw, their faces gaunt and grimy, their eyes glinting in the lantern light like rats'. He explained to her in a calm, unemotional voice that these urchins were vagrants, abandoned or orphaned, of the sort who roamed all of England's towns in packs and had to be eradicated if the citizenry were to live in peace. He told her about burglaries, assaults, armed robberies these creatures had committed, one of them even was a convicted murderer; but she was not listening to him. She gazed at the ratlike dwarfs with a compassion that, though misguided, was deeply moving. He concluded from the manner in which she clutched his hand that she must be almost at the end of her tether; he was loath to expose her to the worst, but he must if the experience was to have its desired effect. He turned to the warden and said, 'Now let us see the rest.'

The warden, who knew what he meant, as it had all been arranged beforehand, said with conspiratory glee, 'Certainly, Your Lordship. We left 'em for your pleasure. This way, please, ma'am'. He led the small procession back along the corridor, past the cages with the shrieking lunatics, the clawing hands; they climbed the spiral stone staircase.

As they went, Margaret asked her husband in a whisper, 'Are there any Quakers imprisoned here?'

He had expected the question and answered, 'There are indeed, but they are all in solitary confinement.'

'Why?'

'These are the new instructions from London.'

The warden opened the door to the courtyard. 'This way, please, ma'am.' She stepped outside.

This time she gasped at what she saw. The Traylor girl cried, 'Oh, no!' and hid her face on her mistress' shoulder. Margaret put her arms around her and stared, her face a mask, at the gruesome sight.

Despite the fact that these three children must have deserved their fate, to see them hanging there, their faces distorted, blue tongues stuck out, their thin, scraggy necks ghoulishly elongated, was harrowing. The frailty of their small bodies, making the nooses look coarse and heavy, grated on even Thomas' sensibilities as they slowly turned in the perpetual draught from the dungeons below that circled the courtyard. He looked at his wife, expecting a mute plea to be led away. She was staring at the sight, the sobbing girl in her arms, but her face was set, her eyes clear. For the first time that morning he felt he had lost contact with her. Then, slowly, she turned towards him; something in her eyes made him realise, with a feeling of disaster, that he had achieved the opposite of what he hoped for.

'Didst thou know about this, Thomas?' she asked. Her voice was casual, without emotion.

'Well, yes . . .' How could he undo the damage? 'I thought it necessary to show thee this. Forgive me if I have gone too far. But this is reality, my dear. I cannot change it by hiding it from thee.'

She looked at him in a way that made him go cold. It was the first time she had set eyes upon a dark part of his life that he had always hidden from her. 'Didst thou condemn these children?'

'No.' He steeled himself for the question he knew must come.

'Hast thou ever condemned children to this?'

He knew that on his answer their future depended. But he could not gainsay the truth. He nodded; he did not trust himself to speak.

The look she gave him was one not of condemnation but somehow of farewell. At his silent request, the warden guided them

out of the courtyard, back to their carriage waiting in the sun. The day was warm; the headless statue of St. George and the benches surrounding it were covered with twittering young birds; it was as if nature conspired to make the image of the dead children even more monstrous. After they had bidden goodbye to the warden and thanked him for his courtesy, they sat mutely in the carriage as it rattled down the cobbled streets of Lancaster on its way home. Margaret had her arms around the Traylor girl, who was still distraught. Her face was calm, almost serene; her eyes expressed no horror, no distress, no emotion at all. His attempts to start a conversation met with no response. He stared out the window of the coach at the lurching landscape for the full nine hours of their journey home. Even when the horses were changed, they did not leave the coach, but waited in silence for the journey to be resumed.

Towards the end, as they approached Ulverston and the girl slept at last, he could bear it no longer. 'Dear heart,' he said, with a despair that he could not hide despite his effort to sound calm and reasonable. 'Thou must not hold me responsible as a person for decisions I am forced to make as a judge.'

She looked at him with an expression he had never seen before and said, 'I am sorry. I cannot make that distinction.'

'But thou must!' he urged. 'I have sworn to uphold the law, I am bound by jurisprudence! Dost thou think I enjoy condemning children to death? It's my duty!'

'I suppose it is,' she said, after a silence.

There was nothing left to say. They arrived home in silence. She did not sup with the family, but retired for the night. He wanted to follow her, plead with her, try desperately to make her see reason. But he knew that only time would, perhaps, bring them back together. Alone in his study, he tried to articulate what had happened. What decisions had she arrived at, behind that calm façade?

Late that night he entered their bedchamber, on tiptoe so as not to wake her, and found the fourposter bed empty. For a moment he thought she had gone into the garden, that he would find her sitting in the dark on the bench near the roses, praying or weeping. But when he emerged on the landing, there was Thomas Woodhouse. 'Margaret Fell asked me to tell thee, Thomas Fell, that she had to leave. She hopes to be back tomorrow.'

The shock was such that he was about to enquire further, but

he checked himself. To discuss his wife's comings and goings with a servant was more than his pride could bear.

'Thank thee, Woodhouse. Good night.'

He turned his back on the man and allowed his feelings to show only when he stood staring at the empty bed. Where had she gone? Wherever Fox was, that's where. My God — what had he driven her to do with her life?

He undressed in the candlelight. When he lay on his back, gazing at the ceiling, he realised it was the first night in twenty years he spent in that bed alone. He asked himself why he had not saddled his horse and followed her.

It was a rhetorical question. Even had he stormed off on horseback at dead of night, even had he known where she was heading, no mortal man could keep her from her appointment in Samarra.

* * *

The coach from Swarthmoor arrived in Windermere towards daybreak after travelling all night along the steep, winding mountain roads. Ann Traylor, sick from the constant lurching and pitching of the carriage, was beyond caring. At the beginning of the journey she had worried about her mistress, who sat opposite her, her face a mask, staring at the ghostly landscape; but soon this headlong rush towards George Fox began to appear senseless, a desperate dash into nothing. Who could undo the sight they had seen? What words could relieve them of that horror, of the confusion and despair that resulted from it? Certainly not George Fox with his notions; to see poor Margaret Fell rush to him for solace in her terrible distress was tragic. But no one could stop her, no one could reach her through the wall beyond which she seemed to have retired. Never before had Ann known her in such a frozen state of despondency; her heart went out towards the woman. But as the night progressed and she herself became weary and unwell, she too withdrew within herself, nursing her own hurt and doubt. What haunted her, even more than the horrendous image of the hanged children, were the faces of those locked up in the cellar at the end of the corridor with the shrieking lunatics. What was to become of them? Were they to be hanged too? Oh, God! How was it possible that human beings could be so cruel! Was there no one to look after those children? What had happened to their parents, their mothers? Underlying those agonised questions was a doubt she barely

dared face: how could God permit the horror they had seen? Was He indeed a God of love?

It was this doubt that threw her into confusion. Had she all her life believed in a fantasy, had she every night since childhood prayed to a mockery, a priests' invention? Sick and bewildered, by the time the coach slowed down and the hoofbeat of the horses and the rattle of the wheels began to echo between the houses of a sleeping village, all she longed for was a room at the inn, a bed, the forgetfulness of sleep. The pale light of dawning had turned the coach windows into bleak squares. 'Is this the inn?' she asked.

Margaret Fell did not reply. Will Hartford climbed down from the driver's seat and opened the door; when he stood there shivering and blue in the early light, she said, 'Go and find George Fox. Tell him to come down at once. Tell him it is urgent.'

Will Hartford closed the door again, muttering, 'Yes, ma'am.'

'Are we going to stay here?' Ann asked, to break the oppressive silence.

Margaret Fell looked at her as if from a distance. Finally, she said, 'I don't think so. I want a word with George Fox; after that we'll return to Swarthmoor.'

'Oh.'

They sat in gloomy silence, each with her own thoughts, until footsteps came hurrying towards them through the gateway of the inn. The door of the carriage was opened and there, in leather breeches, cloak and white hat, was George Fox. Before he had been able to speak, Margaret Fell said, 'Step in, please.' Then, to Will Hartford, 'Drive to the lake. Somewhere away from houses or people. There leave us awhile.'

Will Hartford said, 'Yes, ma'am,' and closed the door.

George Fox was large and dark in the small space of the coach. He said nothing, but seemed to exude tranquillity as they were driven down the empty, hollow streets with their echoing façades to the sudden, spacious silence of the meadows outside the town. There, close to the banks of the lake that lay glinting in the dawn, the carriage halted. 'Please leave us for a moment, Ann,' Margaret Fell said. 'We won't be long.'

She almost said 'Yes, ma'am' like Will Hartford; it was as if all her dreams of freedom had evaporated. 'Very well,' she said wearily; George Fox opened the carriage door for her.

Outside she found Will Hartford waiting. The horses, tired and drowsy, stood steaming in the cold air. From the surface of the lake, smooth and dull like ice, spirals of mist were rising. They walked away from the carriage, down a path along the water's edge; their footfalls seemed dulled by the softness of the fog that reached out around them from the water. They walked until they reached a wooden bench facing the lake; there they sat down side by side and looked back at the silhouette of the coach with its small, glinting windows. It stood in the mist as if it were floating; the steam from the horses rose like smoke.

'She should have given me a chance to rub them down,' Will Hartford said.

* * *

Maybe it was the fact that he had been awakened at such an uncongenial hour, but as George Fox sat listening in the pale light of the dawn to the distraught, almost demented woman opposite him, he was suddenly overcome by anger. He had been convincing people of her class and upbringing for years, apparently with success; now he realised that all his message, his miracles, his power of the Lord had meant to them was a new fad, another remedy for rural boredom. Look at her! She had been sending parcels and letters to people in prisons all over the country; she had been organising the spiritual movement he had started and tried to turn it into an institutionalised church; not it turned out all that had been a fantasy, a mere notion. At the first confrontation with reality in the form of three hanged children, at a glimpse of what people like her husband and his friend Best had been up to in the so-called 'execution of their duty', her newfound faith collapsed. There she sat, crying to have her God restored to her; instead of filling him with pity and compassion, she filled him with fury. She was not a soul in spiritual torment but an upper-class woman outraged by reality after her first horrified glimpse of it. She had dragged him out of bed, demanding he tame it instantly, make it go away, cover that horrendous ocean of darkness and death with his private invention: the infinite ocean of light and love. What did she take him for? How dare she demand that he deliver her from such sights in order that she might return, her authority restored, to her room full of parcels, like a child to a doll's house? Well, it was high time she woke up to the reality of her pastime: the world of the damned, of the lunatics howling in their cages, the world where

the heads of the hanged were boiled in the basement to keep Oxford and Cambridge supplied with skulls. 'What dost thou want of me, Margaret?' he asked, interrupting her, as he could no longer contain himself. 'My help to return to thy comfortable world? Thy comfortable notion of God?'

She looked at him, harrowed, not understanding his harshness. But he was not to be deterred. She had to confront reality at last. 'Thy own husband has hanged those children, Margaret, or others like them, and through him thou hast. Thou art as guilty of the fate of those children as thou art of the fate of the cow whose meat thou eatest. Permissiveness is complicity.'

'George!' Her face was pitiful, her eyes heartbreaking.

But he had to do it, for her sake as well as his. 'I am sorry, Margaret. I will not restore thy ignorance to thee. Thou shalt face the truth alone. Thou shalt turn away from it alone, or confront it alone. This is *thy* moment of truth. Not mine.'

'Isn't it?' Her reaction became, as could be expected, hostile; she now eyed him coldly in the grey light. But her face was that of a woman dying.

Sympathy for her suffering churned within him, but he suppressed it. 'Do not assail me, Margaret. There is no real solace in blaming others for thy awakening, only false comfort.'

'My awakening?' She had recovered her composure and now sat opposite him as the woman he had met in the garden a year before. 'I think the time has come, George, to tell thee exactly what happened when thou didst break into my sheltered world.'

'Margaret, believe me: to blame others is — '

'I'm not blaming thee, George. But the time has come for thee to face reality also. Thou didst change my life with thy message of that of God in everyone, thy concept of God as pure love, but thou didst not convince me by thy words.'

'Does it matter? As long — '

'I *experienced* that love, George; it overwhelmed me. During the months that followed I was steeped in that love, filled with it, I radiated joy and happiness and fulfilment, like a flame. I took it to be rapture of the Divine, communication with the spirit of love, with God.'

'Well?'

'It wasn't. It was love, but not divine. It was carnal love, for a man. For thee.'

'Well? It was not my intention.' He said it coldly.

She looked at him, eyes blazing. 'Of course not! It was I! My body! My ageing body, yearning for one more capture before my dotage, fell in love with thee! With all of thee, George: thy youth, thy maleness, thy hair, thy eyes, thy lips, thy hands; even thy spiritual exaltation or whatever it was made me love thee, not like a convert, but like a woman! Dost thou understand? Had I faced the truth that first day, I would have thought: *Here* is a man whom I desire to hold me in his arms, to drive me to ecstasy, to put me with child!'

Her confession shook him. This was not what he had foreseen when he berated her a moment ago. This was dangerous, for the realised that her violent frankness aroused him, with breath-taking intensity.

'I have not come to ask for sympathy!' she cried. 'I have not come to beg for a consummation of my passion, either! I have come to call thee to judgment! Look: three hanged children. Look: six more, in a cage, waiting to be hanged. What has that of God in thee to say for itself? Either *prove* to me, now, the existence of thy God of love, or be damned to hell for the suffering, the pain, the confusion, the despair thou hast inflicted upon me and thousands of others like me!'

'But my dear Margaret —'

'No! Not thy dear Margaret! Forget about me! Here: six children, locked in a cage, about to be hanged. Now answer me, without evasion, without fancy rhetoric: *Where is the love of God?*'

'Ask Him,' he replied calmly. 'Let us go into meeting.'

'No! None of thy tricks! *Thou* shalt answer me, not thy self-fabricated, silent spirit!'

Suddenly he could take no more. She sat there radiating such power, such elemental femininity that he felt the compulsion to take her in his arms, right here, in this coach, to drown her doubts and his in rapture. He closed his eyes and prayed. 'God. help us!'

Even as he whispered those words, a stillness came over him, a tranquillity that seemed to remove from him the terror of damnation, temptation itself. He opened his eyes and looked at her. 'Margaret,' he said, 'I cannot prove to thee the existence of the God of love. Nobody can do that for thee; only thou canst, thyself.'

She wanted to assail him again, but he said, in the power of the Lord, 'Stop crying for proof of God's love! Prove it thyself!'

Then he added in a gentler tone, 'How else dost thou think He can manifest His love? Through nature? Through the trees, the clouds, the beasts in the field, the stars? No, only through beings capable of doing so: ourselves. In the case of those children in the cage, about to be hanged, it is *thou* He touched. All He has to reach those children is *thee*!'

For a moment she sat motionless. Then she slumped forward, her face in her hands, and sobbed.

* * *

The coach returned to Swarthmoor in late afternoon. As it drew up in front of the house, it was met by her husband, stern and forbidding. The moment she stepped out of the carriage, he hurried towards her. 'Where on earth — '

She silenced him with a perfunctory kiss. 'Not here, Thomas. Let's go upstairs. I have to change, I must get out of these clothes. I feel as if I had been sleeping in them.'

'Well, hast thou not?' he asked bitterly.

'Hardly.'

She swept past him, embraced the children who waited uncertainly in the hall, told them she would soon be back and ran up the stairs to her bedchamber. Mongol welcomed her, squatting on the coverlet of the fourposter, with hoarse, raucous yapping. She put him down with a slap, and heard the door close behind her. There was Thomas, his face white with anger.

'I know, I know,' she said. 'I should have told thee I was going, but I thought it better this way. Thou dost not mind if I change while we talk?'

'Where hast thou been?'

She looked at him, his chalk-white face, his tight-lipped fury. 'I went to see George Fox, in Windermere,' she replied calmly. 'Wouldst thou be so kind?' She turned her back on him; it took a few moments, then she felt his fumbling fingers start to undo the row of buttons down the back of her gown.

'Why, for heaven's sake?' he cried.

'There was something I wanted to ask him.'

'About those hanged children?'

'Those children in the corridor near the lunatics. The ones that have not been hanged yet.' She turned around and faced him. 'I must be frank with thee,' she said. 'I am going back to Lancaster tomorrow, to concern myself with those children.'

He said nothing. He just stood staring at her with those dark,

fierce eyes. It made her turn away and go towards her dresser. She stepped out of her gown and sat down to take the combs out of her hair. She saw him in the mirror.

'Thou art mad.' He said it without emotion, as a statement of fact.

'Probably.' She took out her combs and shook her hair. It felt lovely after that long night. If only she could forget about it all and sleep. She would think about it on the morrow.

'Why go back there? What canst thou possibly achieve?'

She saw him come towards her in the mirror. 'I cannot do otherwise.'

'That is nonsense.'

'No, Thomas. Whatever it is, it is real.'

'Very well.' His voice was urbane once more 'Let us look at it dispassionately for a moment, if we can. Thou dost not mind my putting thee a few questions?'

'As my husband, or as Chief Justice Fell?'

'As thy devil's advocate. Thou dost not realise, I presume, that thou art playing with fire.'

She turned around to face him. 'Oh, dear Tom!' she said impulsively. I'm so terribly sorry . . .'

He did not respond 'Let's keep that until later, shall we? First let us scrutinise thy decision and see what it entails.'

She suddenly knew that this was serious. She must decide whether to tell him the truth; but where would it lead them? She took up her brush, turned her back on him and said, 'I am not sure I like this.' She started to brush her hair, but did not lose sight of him in the mirror. He must be a merciless interrogator on the bench. She had never seen him so fierce and tense; he was a different man.

'When didst thou make the decision to return to Lancaster Castle?'

'This morning.'

'Where?'

'In the coach, on the bank of Windermere Lake.'

'Who was with thee?'

'George Fox.'

'Thou wert alone with him?'

'Yes.'

'Where were the others?'

She put down the brush carefully and turned around. 'Dear Thomas, art thou sure this is what thou wantst?'

'Indeed. I think it is past time.'

She decided to tell him the truth. 'I had sent the others away.'

'Why?'

'I wanted to talk to George Fox alone.'

'About what?'

'I wanted him to tell me . . .' She paused.

'What?'

She looked at him, puzzled. This ferret-like insistence was not like him. Behind the unemotional voice, the unrelenting eyes, there was an anger that made him want to hurt himself, like a child. He must be terribly distressed. 'Tom, love —'

'Margaret,' he said coldly, 'I want the truth.'

She realised that the impulse to shelter him had been her desire to avoid a confrontation. 'Very well.' She turned away and took up her brush again, but she no longer sought him in the mirror. She wanted to reduce him to a voice.

'What happened in that coach?'

'I asked him how a God of love could allow what I had seen, those children.'

'And?'

'He gave me the answer.'

'Then what?'

She found his face in the mirror again. 'Thou art not interested in his answer?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I want to know what happened, not the answer to a theological question.'

'But it wasn't a theological question!'

'It wasn't?'

She started to brush her hair again. This was going to be difficult.

'So what happened?'

'His answer moved me deeply, and I — I burst into tears.'

'Why?'

'Oh, for God's sake!' She slammed the brush down, suddenly unnerved. 'Canst thou not understand?' She covered her face with her hands, knowing it to be a dramatic gesture, somehow hoping he would see through it.

* * *

The way she sat there, her long fair hair around her bare shoulders, her breasts half uncovered by the low-cut bodice, she was the most desirable woman he had ever seen. 'Look, dear heart,' he said, 'I am not enjoying this. I would prefer to spare my sensibilities and conserve my peace of mind. But if thou shouldst indeed return to Lancaster Castle to occupy thyself with those children, it would mean that sooner or later thou wouldst end up in those dungeons thyself, not as an angel of mercy but as a prisoner. Thy only hope now is absolute honesty with thyself. I will permit thee to go if thou must, but only if thou dost not deceive thyself as to thy motives.'

'What matter my motives if I help those children?!' she cried. 'What is it to them whether they are saved by a saint or by a — a . . .'

'Well?'

For a moment she gazed at him Then she said with a sigh, 'Very well. Ask me.'

'Ask thee what?'

She tossed back her hair and took up her brush again. 'I am not his mistress,' she said to the mirror.

'I am glad to hear it.'

'But it is not for want of trying.'

He stiffened. All that was weak and vulnerable in him cried out to him to stop this torture. But he had to know, not for his own sake, for hers. 'Thou wouldst if thou wert given the chance?'

'I was given the chance this morning in the coach. There came a moment when I knew he was ready to take me in his arms. Had I thrown myself at him, we would have become lovers then and there. But something stopped me.'

He wanted to ask, 'The thought of me, perhaps?' But he checked himself in time. 'What stopped thee?'

'His answer to my question. That may sound like an evasion to thee, but it is the truth. His answer to my question was — well, staggering.'

'What did he say?'

'He told me to stop crying for proof of the existence of a God of love. "How can He transmit His love to those children," he said, "if it isn't through thee? It is *thou* He touched. All He has to reach those children is *thee*." '

'He said something similar to me that first night. I thought it a pretty hackneyed thought, frankly. Why did it — '

'I don't know! God, I don't know!' she cried with sudden

vehemence. 'It — it just . . . To me it meant, at that moment . . . Oh, I don't know!'

'Was that the reason why thou didst not throw thyself at him?'

'I know it makes no sense, but when he said that, I — I just collapsed, and wept. Finally, I called Ann Traylor and Will Hartford and took him back to his inn, and that was that. We changed horses and came home in the coach. All the way home I sat thinking, the head of the girl on my lap; she was exhausted, poor child. I could not make out what had happened. But what it amounts to is that I have to go back to those children.'

'Because of what he said?'

'Because what he said is true. In the case of those children in the dungeon, all God has is me. I don't know why that should be so, but I believe it, therefore I must go.'

'And what if it were false?'

She smiled. 'That is a risk I must take.' Turning towards the mirror again, she shook her hair back and began to tie it with a ribbon. It was red velvet and looked exquisite. Somehow the preposterousness of her decision seemed to be summed up in that ribbon.

'Dear God!' he cried. 'How can I make thee understand thou art flirting with death?' It was uncharacteristically dramatic, but he was stricken with an awful, sickening sense of finality. She was going to do it, she was really going to do it, and she did not realise what it meant at all; she never would, until it was too late.

'I am not playing, Tom,' she said earnestly. 'Whatever I may be doing, I am not playing.' She rose and went to the wardrobe. In her silk petticoats she looked an image of sheltered elegance, ignorant of all that was brutal and obscene and cruel, all that was Lancaster Castle.

'Dost thou realise that those children are living on the lowest level, a hundred feet under the ground? That they relieve themselves in the straw they sleep in? That they have vermin, scurvy, mange? That they are murderers, thieves, as close to being animals as any human being can be?'

'That is why I must go,' she said, looking thoughtfully at the row of gowns.

'What about thy own children?' he cried, his self-control crumbling. 'Who is going to look after them while their mother flounces about in prison?'

She gave him a swift glance, then she took out the cornflower-blue robe he had given her after the baby's birth. She laid it on the bed and stepped out of her petticoats. 'There are plenty of people here to look after the children for a while,' she said.

He wanted to take her by the shoulders, shake her, take her in his arms the way he had done on his return from Gleaston when he had been aflame with jealousy of young Fox. But it would mean desertion on his part of the hour of her greatest need. Or was he exaggerating the whole affair? Was this merely another of her impulses, which would run its course as long as he did not bar her way? 'Well — all this seems pretty final, doesn't it?' he said with an effort at sardonic resignation.

'Final?' she asked, stepping into her robe. 'To me it feels like a beginning. For the first time in my life I have the feeling I am free.'

'And so thou puttest thyself in prison.'

She smiled and began to button her robe from the bottom up, slowly covering all that intimate beauty.

In a last effort to save her from herself he went towards her, took her by the shoulders and said, 'Look, dear heart, of course thou art right. I too am deeply distressed that the law imposes such an inhuman penalty on children. But face it, we are not living in the ideal society yet! We are trying to make it so, for our children and our children's children. I am yearning for the day when this will no longer be necessary, when people will look back on the gallows in Lancaster Castle and say . . .'

She looked in his eyes with a strange new tenderness. 'Tom, love, doesn't thou see? That time is *now*.'

'But, sweeting — '

'The moment thy conscience tells thee something is wrong, that is the time to stop it.'

'Oh, Margaret . . . !'

He tried to escape, but she held on to him 'That is why I must go! I must!'

'To do what?!'

'To endure with those children what they are enduring. To bring to them the physical presence of one who cares. To bring their plight, by the fact of my presence, to the attention of those in power. It is the only way to save them.'

'But, dearest!' he cried. 'Thou *canst* not save them! Please, *please* understand that!'

'Why not?' She smiled at him, as remote as the moon.

'Because they will not permit it!'

'Who?'

'The magistrates! The regents! The warden! Everybody!'

'Thou art the highest judicial authority in the county. Even though the regents and the rest may not understand what I am trying to do, they would accommodate me for thy sake, wouldn't they?'

He was overcome by weariness. He freed himself of her arms, went to the bed and slumped down on it. 'Very well,' he sighed. 'Exactly what art thou planning to do with those children?'

While she told him, he lay gazing at the ceiling, listening not to her words but to the sound of her moving about the room. For some reason the sound, at that moment, was melancholy and precious. Gradually he began to listen to her unworldly dream. Schoolbooks, toys, singing lessons, lifting those children out of their darkness into a state of humanity. She obviously had no idea what kind of children they were. She could not conceive, from her sheltered life, that children, even small children, could be monsters of cruelty and savagery. One of the children with whom she so airily proposed to occupy herself was a murderer, despite his tender age. A foul-mouthed little monster, the warden had told him later, worse than a rabid badger, who had brained his adoptive father with a poker. The boy's age, if he remembered rightly, was eleven.

'Very well, dear heart,' he said, interrupting her. 'All this sounds very noble. But what thou hast in mind should go on indefinitely if it were to have any effect. Supposing I were able to get thee in there, how long dost thou plan to stay in Lancaster?'

'Oh, I don't know.' He heard from her tone that she had not even thought about it. 'The Lord will provide.'

'In that case,' he replied, 'the Lord will have to provide in one month's time. That is all I am prepared to give thee: thirty days. After that, whatever the state those children are in, whatever thy success, I demand that thou returnest to thy family.'

'But, Tom—'

'I'm sorry, dear heart, but that is final. One month, or nothing.' He did not tell her that one month was the limit he could take leave of his duties, to watch over her. He could not possibly let her confront the horrendous world of the dungeons alone. 'Thou wilt need a woman to accompany thee. A maid, a companion.'

'Oh — I suppose Ann Traylor. She's a strong, practical girl.'

If he detested anything at that moment, it was strong, practical girls. 'Very well. Who's going to look after the household while thou art gone?'

'Henderson.'

'I shall not be here either, dear heart, and I am not going to leave our household in the hands of Henderson.'

'Well, what about Mistress Best?'

'She has a household of her own!'

'I'm sure she would love to do it, the moment she knows the reason. Would she be acceptable to thee, master?'

He ignored the taunt. 'There are a few things thou shouldst know about Lancaster prison. It is run by two wardens, a day warden and his assistant, who serves at night. Under them are the turnkeys. Then there are the housekeeper and her husband, who provide the food and keep the dungeons clean, or at least they are supposed to. They pay the prison for the privilege, so I need not tell thee that they extort from the prisoners every penny they can sweat out of them. It's a barbaric system, but one of those things that have become a tradition. Those who cannot pay are starved and neglected and put in the worst part of the prison. The children are put on the lowest level because they have no money to pay the housekeeper. The lunatics don't have the sense to know they should.'

'Don't they have relatives to look after them?'

'No. If they had, they wouldn't be there. The titular head of the whole operation is a man called the provost. It is not a permanent office, it rotates among the judges of the district for one session each, three months at a time. They are supposed to reside in the castle during their tenure, but few of them do. It depends on who is provost during this Hilary session, whether the prison staff will co-operate with thee or not.'

'Why shouldn't they?'

'Because, dear heart, the prison is riddled with corruption. God only knows what goes on in those dungeons, especially at night. To be a turnkey in Lancaster Castle is a horrible job and the men are paid very little. Why do they do it? I have never gone into that question, but I'm afraid the answer is: because they like it. What exactly they like about it nobody is in a position to know because nobody ever goes in there. It is a world that belongs to the housekeeper and the turnkeys, not even the warden, who sits in his office in the gateway and rarely goes down. Thou hast no

idea what kind of hellhole thou art proposing to invade.'

She looked at him with kindness. He knew that face; she was listening to indulge him, but her mind was made up and no man could change it, least of all himself. Her harebrained concern would have to run its course; all he could do was be around to protect her, should the need arise. 'Well,' he said, 'I think I'll go down to my study for a moment before supper. Wouldst thou care to join me for a glass of sack?'

'No, dear heart. I had better occupy myself with the children. I told them I would soon be back; that was an hour ago.'

'Very well. I'll see thee anon.'.

He went to his study, poured himself a double drambuie, on which he choked; then he slumped in his chair behind his desk, found Sam Pruitt's ledger on it, was about to toss it aside with an oath when he checked himself and began to leaf through it. Sam kept meticulous track not only of his own appointments but also of the movements of the judges in his jurisdiction.

During Hilary the provost of Lancaster prison was John Sawrey.

CHAPTER TWO

WARDEN FARRAGUT was a youngish, rather florid man who, once he was away from the oppressive shadow of Lord Chief Justice Thomas Fell, turned out to be quite a one for the ladies. He received the two women in his office in the gateway with profuse courtesy; he even ordered his assistant to unburden them of the baskets they were carrying. They were chatting amiably and Ann Traylor was expecting him to ask the turnkey to guide her and Margaret Fell to the children when suddenly his face darkened as the man showed him something he had dug out of one of the baskets. A doll.

'Toys, Madam?' the warden asked, his face hostile.

'Why not?' Margaret Fell seemed as taken aback as Ann was herself.

'Forgive me, Madam, but I am forced to reconsider your involvement with those children. Your approach is not one to which I could subscribe.'

Margaret Fell frowned; Ann knew her well enough to realise

that the man was in for a surprising experience. Her mistress hated to be thwarted under any circumstances; she had prepared this expedition to the children in prison with such determination that she was not likely to let herself be frustrated at the last moment. 'Would you care to explain why?' she asked coldly.

The warden turned the doll over and contemplated it with sombre mien. 'These children, Madam, are criminals. They are in prison to be punished for their misdeeds. To teach them to read and write is one thing, to pamper them with toys is out of the question.'

'In that case, we shall take out the toys.'

But the warden was not mollified. 'No, Madam; I will have to discuss this with my superiors.'

'Your superiors?' Margaret Fell stuck out her chin, a gesture that Ann Traylor had come to know well. 'This visit was arranged by my husband, who happens to be your superior. Is that not so?'

The warden smiled. 'Ah, if it were only your husband, Madam! But there are others whom I have to consider.'

'And who might they be?'

The warden fell back into his role of charming host. 'May I suggest you go back to your inn, Madam, just for today, and return tomorrow morning? I am sorry to cause you this inconvenience, but under the circumstances I am not authorised to admit you.'

'Which circumstances, for heaven's sake?!' Margaret Fell's eyes flashed; if the warden knew what was good for him, he would now stop his procrastination.

But he did not relent. 'I regret, Madam, but I cannot change the rules established by the regents of this prison. I am in their employ, Madam.'

Margaret Fell rose briskly. 'Who are the regents? Where do they live? I'll go and see them at once.'

The warden, who had risen also, looked at the imperious woman with forbearance. To Ann Traylor there was something odd in his attitude, something she could not put her finger on. 'Madam, I assume it is your intention to help those children?'

'I thought I made that plain.'

'In that case, may I give you a piece of advice? Do not stir up any more official awareness of your concern than is strictly necessary. For the moment, only your husband and I know of your worthy intentions. It would be my advice to leave things as

they are. Believe me, it is your only hope of achieving your goal.'

Margaret Fell looked at the man musingly. She was obviously weighing a decision in her mind. 'Very well,' she said, finally. 'I confess that I fail to understand what the fuss is about, but if this is what we have to contend with, so be it. We shall be back tomorrow morning. I trust there will be no further delays.'

'I cannot see why there should be, Madam.' The warden bowed, unable to hide his relief. 'Good day, Madam, young lady. Until tomorrow: Godspeed.'

Without returning his greeting, Margaret Fell swept out of the office, leaving it to Ann to carry the baskets. They were heavy: schoolbooks, Bibles, writing materials, toys; the snooping jailer had not dug deep enough to discover the sweetmeats.

Outside, in the bright sunshine, Margaret Fell's face looked flushed with anger. 'Here, give me that,' she said, taking her basket. 'I'm of a mind to send a message to my husband. But perhaps it is best not to make too much of it. We'll see what happens tomorrow.' She hooked her arm through the handle of the basket and marched back to the inn, half a step ahead of her young companion, who thought it best to remain unobtrusive under the circumstances.

At the inn, where they had taken rooms that were simpler than those to which the wife of Chief Justice Fell was accustomed but on which she had insisted, Margaret Fell seemed to have overcome her anger. 'It's a stupid business,' she said, putting down her basket on the table. 'I suppose, like all little men, he feels he has to act the *grand seigneur*, lest we underestimate his importance. Well, what shall we do for the rest of the day?'

'We could seek out the Friends in these parts,' Ann suggested.

Margaret Fell frowned. 'No. After what happened this morning, that would not be a good idea. I don't know exactly what it is, but something about this business makes me, well, wonder.' She picked up her shawl again. 'Let's go for a walk,' she said. 'We haven't been out in the air for days.'

That was nonsense. They had been traipsing about the town for three days running, buying the articles considered suitable for the education of illiterate children. But Ann knew her mistress well enough not to demur; obediently she followed her down the narrow stairs to the courtyard and out into the street. What she would have liked to do was to stay upstairs, to write in her diary

in the privacy of her room, but she accompanied her mistress for a stroll through the town to the bluffs. There they sat down, to gaze at the blinding sunlit bay. It was a warm spring day, the birds were out, there was a whiff of blooming heather in the air. Margaret Fell talked a lot, but Ann did not really listen; she was yearning to get back to her diary.

It was not until late that night, after their sober evening meal, when they had finally retired to their rooms, that she was given the chance to confront her bewildering emotions. She had to be careful; Margaret Fell might turn up any time, unannounced. She lit a candle and put it on the small table, facing the door; then she fetched her inkwell, quill and the exercise book. She put her left hand inside it, ready to flip back the pages to Bonny Baker's exercises at the slightest sound.

'*Today I discovered that I am a fraud*,' she wrote. '*A week ago I was moved to tears by the sight of those sad, lost children huddled in the straw, their eyes glistening in the lantern light; now here I am: wondering how I can avoid going to their aid. What is this fear whenever I think of the dungeons? That corridor with the mad people? Those clawlike hands, reaching for me? The stench, the screams, the ghastly atmosphere of that horrible place? I do not know. Reason assures me that there is no danger to me personally. But something, some premonition or I know not what, conspires to send me into a panic the moment I approach the castle. This morning when the warden turned us back, I felt like embracing the man out of sheer gratitude. Afterwards, during our walk, I felt deeply ashamed. Tonight . . .*' She flipped back the pages and stared at the door. It had been a false alarm; but it made her sufficiently uneasy to close the book and put inkwell and quill away. She took the candle to the bedside table and undressed. Before climbing into bed, she knelt down, her head on the counterpane. She tried to plead with God to forgive her, to fill her with fortitude and determination. But the words would not come; there was only the image of that dark gateway, and it filled her with a fear the like of which she had never known.

* * *

The next morning the warden again received them wreathed in smiles; but the moment she set eyes on him Margaret Fell knew that he was not going to admit them. And indeed, with effusive courtesy he informed Mistress Fell that, to his chagrin, the

regents considered it unwise to admit ladies of her social status and costly attire into the presence of the prisoners, who were all of humble origin and would inevitably be aroused to ire by someone like her appearing among them. So, though he regretted it deeply, he had to refuse them admission.

To challenge him Margaret said, 'If that is indeed the reason, then surely my companion will pass muster. No one in his senses could describe her as a representative of affluence.'

Before the man had been able to counter this, poor Ann went deathly pale and turned to her with eyes filled with horror. 'Oh, I pray you, no!' she pleaded. 'Do not do that! I could not, I could not possibly go in there alone!'

'Very well, very well.' The child's reaction took her aback; she had had no idea that the prison held such terror for her. 'May I ask whose idea this was, Mr. Farragut?'

'Beg pardon, ma'am?' The warden looked almost pathetically shifty.

'Come, come,' she said, giving him her most captivating smile. 'I'm not going to make life difficult for you. I understand that you have to follow orders, and I know that this is a real embarrassment, if not a sorrow to you.'

The man heaved a discreet sigh of relief. 'I'm so glad you take that attitude, Mistress Fell. I really am grieved by this arbitrary—' He realised too late that he had already said too much.

'I think it will make things a great deal easier if you tell me who is behind all this,' she continued. 'As you know, my husband has given orders that we are to be admitted; it would be wise if I could offer him proof that this procrastination is not of your making.'

He eyed her warily. 'I could not possibly do so, Madam,' he said with a demureness that raised her hopes. 'All it will take on your husband's part is to raise the matter with Justice Sawrey.'

So it was little John Sawrey. 'Well,' she said cheerfully. 'I am afraid we'll have to wait another day, won't we? I'll make it a point to turn up in the morning in the humblest of gowns. Good day to you, sir.' She bestowed a ravishing smile upon him. 'I hope to find you in good health tomorrow morning, please God. Come, Ann.' Taking the child by the arm, she left the office with what she hoped was a convincing show of cheerful compliance.

Thoughts about Sawrey preoccupied her during their walk

back to the inn; it was only when they were back in their rooms that she remembered the poor, terrified girl.

'I'm sorry I made that hasty suggestion, dear Ann. Of course, I wouldn't dream of letting thee go in there by thyself.'

But Ann had had a chance to recover. 'Oh, not at all,' she said. 'I just thought it inadvisable to allow them to separate us.'

'Of course.'

Obviously, the girl did not want to discuss it; she must be ashamed of her fears. But why should she be? After all, she was only eighteen years old; that first visit to the prison must have made a deep impression on her. 'I wonder what Mr. Sawrey will think of next,' Margaret said, to change the subject. 'I intend to give in to his whims until he runs out of excuses.'

She spent the rest of the day shopping for a gown that would be inconspicuous. Only the third dressmaker she visited had something to offer: a modest rather sombre dark brown bodice and skirt with matching capulet, obviously intended as a first replacement for widow's weeds. It did not quite fit her, but it would do, although it exposed her feet rather uncomfortably. It was in this uncompromising outfit that she turned up for her third effort to penetrate the fastness of Lancaster Castle the next morning.

Again the warden, waiting for them, was courtesy personified. This time he appeared genuinely embarrassed when he told them that he could not admit them this day either, as there was a rapist loose in the castle. They had been unable to catch the man; it might be one of the inmates, possibly from the debtors' section. There had been two attacks upon women in the corridors the night before; he did not dare risk their being assaulted.

As excuses went, it was one of the better ones, even though Margaret was convinced it was a fabrication. 'I am moved by your concern, Mr. Farragut,' she said charmingly. 'I will not go against your wishes. I trust you will catch the miscreant before tomorrow morning.'

'Ah!' The warden spread his hands. 'We do our best, Madam. But we have over a hundred inmates . . .'

'Quite. In the meantime, should you be honoured by a visit from Justice Sawrey, would you kindly give him a message on my behalf?'

'Oh . . . well . . . I'm not sure I will see him . . .' Obviously, he had not expected this.

'Just a casual greeting,' she said lightly. 'We have a mutual

friend called John McHair, who wishes to be remembered. Would you be so kind? John McHair. Not a difficult name to remember, is it?'

'No, indeed.' The warden watched her with wariness. 'It will be a pleasure, Madam.'

'Thank you so much. Good day to you, gentlemen, and I hope to see you tomorrow in good health, *sans* rapist. Yes?' Without waiting for their reply, she took Ann Traylor's arm and left the office, image of charming unconcern.

Back at the inn, she was sorry. This was not the way in which, as a child of the Light, she was supposed to approach conflict. To intimidate Sawrey with a veiled threat was the very reverse of what George would have wanted her to do. She should have gone for that of God in the little judge — whatever that meant. Anyhow, it was too late. Sawrey had probably been close by and overheard their conversation.

That night, before she fell asleep, it occurred to her that this latest excuse might well have been valid. She should be very careful not to fall prey to her own imagination.

Imagination or not: when they turned up the next morning, they were admitted.

* * *

When the warden said, 'Yes, ladies — this time the road is clear,' Ann Traylor, who had expected they would be turned back again, went numb with terror. She tried desperately to emulate Margaret Fell as they crossed the gateway towards the door that led into the dungeons and made an effort to stride as calmly as she, with the same quiet determination; but when the jailer with the lantern turned the key in the heavy low door and pulled it open, she could not help herself, she clutched Margaret Fell's arm at the first whiff of the cadaverous stench that met them.

They stepped inside; the dank, clammy cellar air enveloped them. Staring down into the dark well of the staircase, Ann began to tremble. She could do nothing about it; she stood shivering like a leaf. Margaret Fell put her hand on hers and said, 'Careful now! As I remember it, these steps are very slippery.' It was not what she said but the way she said it that brought Ann a momentary comfort sufficient to enable her to make a first step down. The eerie black pit with its wet stone walls, cold to the touch and slimy, seemed filled with the accumulated pain and

madness of two centuries of torture. Or was it three centuries? The warden had told them the history of the dungeons that first time; all she remembered from his discourse was that the maze of levels and passages had been dug as a silver mine in Roman times, and that the deepest level was a hundred feet down. That was where the children were. That was where they were going. She wondered how she was going to make it.

The lantern light sent eerie glimmerings wheeling on the wet, circular wall. It felt as if she were lowered into a mass grave full of people buried alive. The stench became fouler as they descended, a reek of mould and things rotting, of excrement and vomit and —

A hooting of many voices, amplified by echoes into one howl of derision, took both women completely by surprise. They had reached the first cavernous landing; dark passages branched out from it, from which the awful howl of hatred came. The jailer shouted, 'Shut up, you buggers! Shut up, damn you, you filthy swine!' Then, realising he was guardian-guide to the wife of the Lord Chief Justice, he mumbled, 'Beg pardon, ma'am, but that's the only language they understand. Animals, the lot of them. Filthy, vicious animals.'

Margaret Fell said nothing. When they continued on their way, down the flight of steps into the black pit, she gripped Ann's arm firmly, as if to give her support. But this time her hand trembled too; curiously, it gave Ann a sense of comfort.

On the next landing the same thing happened: boos, shrieks, clamourings, whistles, all milled together by the echoes of the corridors into a subterranean howl, as if some colossal monster were lurking in the bowels of the earth. But some of its menace seemed to have gone; Ann no longer felt the sickening fear that something would burst out of those black, gaping mouths. Terrifying as the sound might be, it was obviously that of helpless hatred, caged and chained.

The chill seemed to deepen as they descended. The stench became more stifling. The atmosphere had nothing left reminiscent of the open, of freedom. It was as if they inhaled some of the horror of the dungeons each time they breathed. There was a draught in the pit; Ann remembered the warden telling them about chimneys or air ducts. It made her clutch her basket and hold on more tightly to Margaret Fell's arm as she became giddy with the slow spiral of their descent.

The descent seemed endless, much longer than last time. Sud-

denly, about halfway down, the dull stupor that had gradually taken the place of Ann's fear was shattered as, with a high-pitched, witchlike shriek, a huge black object came plummeting down upon them from above. She cried out and threw herself against the wall; Margaret Fell pressed her against her with a wild grip of fright. The black object plunged past into the blackness below; all she had been able to make out was that it had wheels. A rope, taut and quivering, which had not been there before, seemed to be reeling it down from the mouth of the pit above.

'Ah, yes,' the jailer said, unperturbed. 'That was Mistress Fraley's cart. She's the housekeeper. She and her hubby are changing the straw on five. It's hauled up and down by a pulley.'

'I see,' Margaret Fell said. 'How interesting. Shall we go on?'

As they continued their way down, the dungeons became quieter. No more howls taunted them from the dark, gaping tunnels. Yet the feeling of hatred directed at them was as strong as ever, despite the silence. It was as if the subterranean animal living in those deeper caves was too weak, too sick to give voice to its rage. It was almost with a feeling of relief that Ann heard, towards the end of their descent, a shrill shrieking from below. It grew in volume as they continued; when finally they found themselves at the bottom and followed the jailer and his lantern into a passage, she realised that it was the lunatics. The yells and curses of the poor, demented creatures became deafening; there were those ghoulish claws again, reaching out towards them, trying to grab them as they passed. In the twilight of the cage the madwomen barked and howled, swore blood-curdling curses, slammed their chains against the bars. When at last they entered the children's cell after a rattling of keys and a squealing of rusty hinges, Ann heard the gate close behind her with a feeling of relief. While the jailer was explaining to Margaret Fell how to let herself out, she looked at the children cowering in the lantern light. There were six of them, all staring at her, their eyes glistening in their dirty faces with an inhuman, ratlike intensity. She had been deeply moved when she had first seen them; this time, perhaps because of her fear, she was repelled by their rags, their grime, the scales on their faces, their snotty, open-mouthed moronity. How was it possible? Only a week ago she had stood staring at these same children with tears running down her face; in

the coach on the way to Windermere she had wept at the memory of their pathetic misery; now she felt only disgust. It all seemed incongruous, a terrible mistake.

Margaret Fell approached them. 'Well, children, my name is Margaret, my young friend here is Ann, and we have come to take care of you. Now, let us see. Whom have we got here? What's thy name, child?'

The little girl she addressed stared at her, slack-jawed, snot glistening on her upper lip, slowly scratching her chest through her rags. Ann's feeling that it was all a mistake deepened. To her horror, she felt her admiration for her mistress falter at a sudden, unsettling doubt. What if it were no more than a rich lady's fancy? What gave her the idea that these children could be reached by gentleness, concern, love? Least of all by the genteel, forced cheerfulness with which Margaret Fell proceeded to try and coax them out of their gawking passivity. Only one among them seemed to possess a shimmer of intelligence: a one-eyed boy in a filthy green overcoat, much too large for him, who stood leaning against the wall and stared at them with a contemptuous sneer. He was the only one whose ankles were chained together.

When the children refused to be charmed into any form of communication, Margaret Fell began to unpack her basket. She produced Bibles, hornbooks, slates, pencils, chalk, all of which she spread out on the straw in front of the gaping little creatures. Ann knew her heart should be wrung with pity for them, but they were so far removed from any children she had known that she could not bring herself to consider them as such. She could not even tell them apart, except for the one girl and the one-eyed boy. The other four seemed completely identical in their filthy anonymity. They came to life only when Margaret Fell produced the forbidden sweetmeats. The moment she held out one towards the girl, they all pounced on it with one terrifying lunge; before she knew what had happened they were fighting, screaming, clawing, biting, kicking, rolling in the straw, trying to grab the comfit from one another; the little girl cowered, bawling, in a corner; the one-eyed boy in the green overcoat stared at them with contempt. Margaret Fell grabbed the lantern, as the rolling mass of arms and legs threatened to overturn it; if the straw caught fire, they would all be burned to death. Ann found herself praying fervently that God might prevail upon her mistress to let the children take what they wanted, and to open the door so the two

of them might get out, back to the daylight, the world of the living.

But Mistress Fell was not ready to abandon anything. With a feeling of desperation, Ann watched her determined, ladylike effort to bring the children under control. It was ludicrous; no wonder the warden had done his best to dissuade them, this could only end in disaster for all concerned. Ann felt completely discouraged, but somehow Margaret Fell managed to keep the litter of animals from tearing each other to pieces. She lined them up in a row, gave them a book, a slate and a pencil each, and started her first lesson.

'*A — apple.* See that, children? Let's try and write that on our slates. *A* for *apple* . . .'

Ann, leaning against the bars of the cage, closed her eyes. It was obvious that the children were not going to obey. They were not going to do anything. They were not even listening; all of them were gazing with those bright, ratlike eyes at the baskets. Any moment now they would throw themselves upon them, dig in them until they had found the sweetmeats and roll fighting in the straw again until the comfits were lost or eaten. The madwomen down the corridor ululated, called, 'Dearie? Dearie? Dearie, dearie?' One shouted a filthy suggestion; the mad voices all shrieked with laughter. Ann's stomach turned at the thought of what might happen to her if she ever were to find herself within reach of those claws; she was certain the obscene catcalls were directed at her. But there was Margaret Fell, now trying, of all things, to teach those wretched little creatures 'The Andalusian Merchant', a six-part madrigal so complicated that it had taken her own daughters three weeks to get it right. When she started to sing in her refined, cultured soprano she set the insane women screaming with doubled fury, rattling their cage, slamming their chains against the bars until the din drowned her dainty singing.

For the rest of the day Ann squatted in the straw that reeked of excrement and urine, deafened by shrieks, stared at contemptuously by the ghoulish boy in the corner, until, finally, Margaret Fell decided that it was enough. She gathered the slates, pencils, schoolbooks, Bibles and put them back in the baskets.

'All right, children,' she said in that cheery, ridiculous voice, 'for a first day this went very well indeed. We will be back tomorrow, and I'm sure it won't be long before we are used to

each other and can start learning something. It's *learning* that's going to be your way back to the world, children! The moment you know how to read —'

'Oh, shit!'

She looked up sharply. The boy in the corner grinned, his solitary eye leering at her with satisfaction.

'That was not very nice,' Margaret Fell said calmly.

'Shit shit shit! Stinking whore!' the boy said deliberately.

It did not make the slightest impression on the mistress of Swarthmoor Hall. 'That is a sorry vocabulary, my young friend,' she said quietly. 'I hope we'll put some different words into thy head.'

'Shit,' the boy said. 'Ballocks. Filthy bitch.'

Margaret Fell turned away. Her face was set in the haughty, firm-lipped indifference she always showed whenever one of her children or servants aroused her displeasure. 'Let's go, Ann,' she said. 'Please hold the lantern while I unlock the door.'

'Shit, shit,' the boy said, behind them. 'Arse rot.'

Margaret Fell produced the key from her bodice, stuck her hand through the bars and fumbled with the lock. Ann wondered whether her mistress was aware of the danger; she herself watched the children tensely as she held up the lantern, prepared to see them lunge for freedom the moment the door was opened. But, to her surprise, not one of them made a move when hinges squealed and the gate swung inwards; it seemed the opening of the door of their dungeon no longer meant freedom to them. It was the one moment in which she felt a twinge of pity for the alien creatures squatting in the straw, gaping at her as she slipped out of their world into the passage. Margaret Fell turned the key, put it back in her bodice and headed for the well of the stairs.

It was a marvellous moment, so full of inexpressible relief that Ann felt as if she had been freed of a crushing load; she did not even mind the demented shrieks of the madwomen, whom they set screaming in their cage like damned souls in hell. Then, as they passed the first of the narrow passages that branched off the corridor, it happened.

A faceless man in a cloak, a hat pulled over his eyes, sprang into the lantern light. Ann was so stunned by his sudden appearance that she did not realise what was happening; then he grabbed her, pulled her towards him with cruel force and she screamed in terror when she felt his hands grab her bodice, tear

it, grope for her breast. She dropped the lantern; in the sudden darkness she fought, scratched, bit, kicked, struggled. She felt his hands on her naked body, she knew what he was about to do, with a last shriek of anguish she tried to tear herself free, without avail. But as she sagged in his arms in limp surrender, on the brink of unconsciousness, his grip suddenly slackened. His breath left her neck; she saw, unfocused, a figure behind him in a faint light, slamming something bulky on his head, his back, until finally he let go and fled. She slumped to the ground, heard Margaret Fell's voice say, 'Ann! Dear heart, Ann!' She felt her arms around her, and fainted.

* * *

After beating off the girl's assailant with her basket, Margaret Fell was panic-stricken. The jailer finally came running to her assistance with another lantern, and when the girl regained consciousness, she helped him guide her upstairs. The poor child looked pitiful. Margaret felt overcome by guilt. Physically, nothing irrevocable had happened to the girl, thank God, but emotionally? It was all her fault, it seemed to underscore the recklessness of the whole ill-considered undertaking.

When they approached the warden's office, she saw a male figure in a cloak and a black hat emerge and make off at the sight of them. It struck her momentarily as strange; in the warden's office, as they settled Ann in a chair, her eye was caught by something on the floor in front of the desk. It was a brightly coloured sweetmeat. When she had lambasted the man with her basket, she had showered him with its contents; he had dropped the comfit from his cloak.

It instantly restored her self-confidence; the fact that the assault had been part of Sawrey's campaign filled her with a new determination. She should get Ann to the inn as quickly as possible, but it was important that she should talk to the warden first. She said to him, 'I would like a word with you in private, please.'

Surprised but courteous, he requested his turnkey to leave them alone for a moment; when the man had left, she confronted him. 'Friend,' she said, 'the attack on this child was made by one of thy creatures. I'm not going to pursue the matter, but I am distressed. For her sake and that of the children, but especially for thy own sake, Friend.'

'But Madam . . .' He was trying to recover his aplomb.

'I must warn thee that by thy actions thou art putting thyself in the power of evil. It is a choice, dear Friend; the choice is thine.'

'Madam,' the warden said bravely. 'I have my orders.'

She looked at his fleshy face. He was corruptible, and therefore approachable. Sawrey himself was beyond her reach, immured in his own cold ferocity. 'Pray, tell thy superiors that we will be back tomorrow.'

He sighed. 'Madam,' he said kindly, 'have you not understood yet that your presence is not wanted in this prison? I admire your motives. I admire your tenacity. But you cannot win this battle. Your husband is here only rarely. He may be the highest authority in the judiciary, this prison is not under his control. There are others, determined that you shall not interfere with the prisoners.'

She hesitated, then the compulsion became too strong. 'What's thy name?' she asked.

'Pardon?'

'Thy first name.'

Bewildered, he answered, 'Hyman.'

'Friend Hyman,' she said, feeling as if she were impersonating George Fox, 'thou hast, like all of us, that of God in thee. If it tells thee that something is wrong, thou canst not make it right by thinking, "It is not I who does it, it is the warden of Lancaster prison." Thou canst hide from God behind thy office as little as I can hide behind my own. I am a mother, and a magistrate's wife. I should be looking after my own children, I should not embarrass my husband, I should not act against the wishes of the regents — '

'Or the church?'

She looked at him, startled.

He glanced at the door. 'Madam, let me warn you. Do not address anyone else in this prison as you just addressed me. Your husband's position will not protect you. On the contrary.'

Impulsively she said, 'Thank thee, Friend. Or should I say, thank you, sir?'

He smiled self-consciously. 'In the privacy of my office, Madam, I should be honoured if you would address me as Hyman.'

'Thank thee, Friend Hyman.'

She went to Ann, slumped in the chair as pale as a sheet. 'I'll take thee home now. Come, dear.'

She helped the girl to her feet; the warden helped guide her out of the office, down the steps and out the gate. She wanted to call for a sedan chair to carry them to the inn, but the fresh air seemed to do the child good. When they arrived at their lodgings after a slow, careful walk, Ann had recovered, but still clung to her with frightened intensity.

Even in the privacy of their rooms the poor child refused to let go of her. Kind words, soothing admonitions made no difference; the only thing that seemed to give the girl solace was the comfort of her closeness. So, after they had bathed and changed, she decided to go to bed although it was still early, and to take the child with her, as she would one of her own daughters. Only when she lay in bed, the girl pressed tightly against her, did she discover how exhausted she was herself. The moment her head touched the pillow, drowsiness overwhelmed her.

On the brink of sleep she realised she had not had a chance to think about the children. She obviously had not yet found a way to communicate with them. The one-eyed boy and his obscene language did not distress her much; despite his efforts to appear grown-up and cynical, he obviously was no more than a terrified child. The words were sheer bravado, as the hysterical giggles had been with which her own girls used to collapse at the word 'buttocks' when they were little. Poor boy, if only she could reach him! But maybe, in order to do that, she should love him first.

The idea woke her up for a moment from her drowsy slide into sleep. Love? Could she force herself to love that sad, one-eyed urchin, so filthy, so sick, so full of hate?

'Hush, baby, hush,' she muttered sleepily to the girl in her arms. When she realised that the child was asleep, she fell asleep herself.

* * *

The night Ann Traylor spent in Margaret Fell's bed was one of pure bliss. She was pursued by nightmares, but each time she woke up, heart pounding, there was the warm, placid body of her mistress, the peaceable rhythm of her breathing. In her half-sleep Ann felt happy and secure; she almost began to enjoy those nightmares. For, despite the reality of their terror, she never quite lost the awareness that she would wake up in the bliss of utter security. It was all behind her now; after this there could be no question of their continuing their efforts.

But she discovered the next morning, to her shocked amazement, that her mistress was returning to the prison. It meant, of course, that she would have to go with her. It filled her with a sense of outrage, of betrayal. The tenderness and the love she felt for the woman must be totally unrequited; all Margaret Fell thought about was those infernal children. Whether her companion had to go through the terrors of hell as a result not only did not interest her, it did not even occur to her.

But as it turned out, Margaret Fell did not expect Ann to accompany her. She expected her to stay at the inn and rest; it was ridiculous to risk, for a second time, an experience like that. But by then Ann's feeling of shock had turned into hostility. For some reason, it prompted her to say, 'Of course I'll come. I cannot possibly let thee go alone. If thou canst go back in there, so can I.'

She could not understand why she made this foolish suggestion. Everything in her cried out in raw terror at the thought of having to descend into that darkness again. But she could not help herself; something stronger than she demanded that she accompany her mistress, a spirit of rebellion, almost of revenge. But when they set out once again with their refilled baskets for Lancaster Castle she realised that what compelled her to hang on to her mistress was weakness: she could not let go of the security the presence of the woman gave her; she would have felt utterly bereft without her. It was a sort of enslavement; she wanted to stay behind, but discovered she could not. If only she had gone on noble considerations! But no: here she went, trotting at the leash of her own feebleness. It was shameful; as a result her hostility increased towards Margaret Fell and everything she stood for: Quakerism, selflessness, those children, who, as any sane person could see, were beyond saving.

They were met in the gateway by the turnkey, who must have been waiting for them. He said he had orders to escort them to the children's cell; when they were ready to leave, the ladies should blow a whistle he gave them and he would come to escort them back. Ann, hating everyone and despising herself, again descended into the nether world of Lancaster Castle. Despite the jailer's presence, the moment she set foot on the stone steps she was certain it would happen again. At last the key rattled in the lock, the rusty hinges squealed and she found herself facing those ghoulish children once more. She could not help it, she felt a frightened hatred for them. She sat down in the straw with her

back against the grille to watch Margaret Fell's hopeless efforts at turning those little sewer rats into human beings. When Margaret struck up 'The Andalusian Merchant' in that genteel, refined soprano of hers, Ann closed her eyes. Again, all the woman achieved was to set the lunatics shrieking. The children uttered not a sound.

Then silence fell. It fell so brusquely and was so ominous that Ann knew, even before she turned around, that someone had arrived whom everybody feared, even the wretches next door. In the light of a lantern, politely held high by the warden, stood Justice John Sawrey, small and smiling.

'Good morning, Mistress Fell,' he said in his high, effeminate voice. 'I have come to see how you are progressing. Open the gate.'

The warden hastily obliged. Ann moved aside; the gate swung inward on its squealing hinges.

Margaret Fell, normally not given to gestures of humility, rose to her feet. 'Oh, I pray you,' the little man said with a smile. 'Don't let me interrupt. Pray continue.'

Margaret Fell ignored his request and faced him fearlessly. 'Yes, Mr. Sawrey? What is it you wish?'

'I simply wanted to ascertain for myself that everything is as you wish it, Madam,' Sawrey said. 'Is there anything I can do to make your task easier?'

'No, thank you.' Her politeness was, somehow, crushing.

'In any case, your task will be somewhat lighter as from the first Saturday of next month,' the little man said in the same pleasant tone. 'On that date you will have one child less to concern you.' He pointed at the one-eyed boy. 'He will be hanged that morning.'

Margaret Fell's mouth fell open; to her own surprise, Ann reacted with coldness. She saw at once that Sawrey had come to announce, as part of his campaign, that Margaret Fell's meddlesome intervention had hastened along the child's doom. Instead of saving the children as she had set out to do, all she had achieved was to advance the execution date of one of them.

Justice Sawrey made a bow and a sweep, scraped his leg in the straw and left. The boy remained motionless, leaning against the wall, his face frozen in a snarl.

Margaret Fell turned towards him. 'Child . . .'

'Shit,' he said. 'Shit. Shit. Shit to thee.'

But the woman would not heed the warning. She went towards

him, wading through the straw, stretched out her arms, perhaps expecting him to collapse on her shoulder. At her approach, his snarl became a hiss. 'Piss on thee!' he hissed. 'Stinking whore! Ballocks! Ballocks!'

Much as she detested him, Ann felt a twinge of sympathy.

'I — I am so terribly sorry . . .' Margaret Fell said foolishly.

Ann knew what would happen, and it came: a sharp, chilling smack. The boy had no recourse but to slap her face.

For a moment all remained silent; Ann waited for the shrill throb of the whistle.

But she was mistaken. 'All right, children,' Margaret Fell said, turning away, taut but controlled. 'Let us try again. "*The Andalusian Merchant that returns, laden with cochineal and china dishes . . .*" ' There came her refined drawing-room soprano, followed by the first scream of a madwoman in the neighbouring cell. Moments later the corridor was echoing with shrieks, catcalls, the rattling of doors, the clanging of chains slammed against iron bars. It was as if Sawrey had never been; the only change was that Margaret Fell's left cheek was bright red.

The indomitable woman stayed in the dungeon all day. She achieved nothing other than to turn herself into the laughingstock of the prison. For when they were finally guided back to freedom by the turnkey and climbed the endless steps, a sound pursued them from the dark mouths of corridors on every landing. '*The Andalusian Merchant! . . . The Andalusian Merchant!* . . .' It seemed as if all the damned souls in hell were howling in derision at the woman fleeing up the stairs

Outside in the daylight, Margaret Fell looked as if she had seen a ghost. Ann could not help but feel an inexpressible relief. This was the end; no sane person would set foot in that prison again after what they had wrought.

They supped in silence. Margaret Fell did not touch her food. There was no sharing of her bed; Ann retired to her room alone. Facing the door, her left hand inside the book, she wrote, '*Well, today brought the end of the ordeal. The one-eyed boy is to be hanged.*'

She did not continue. There was a restlessness in her, she could not concentrate. She went to the window for a breath of air.

The night was full of stars; the black silhouette of the castle towered among them. The Milky Way, unimaginably far, unimaginably vast, shimmered mysteriously.

It was as if she began to discern in the world-large whorls of the Milky Way a face, a shape. She saw for a moment, fleetingly, a man slowly coming towards her. She caught, like a whiff of blossoms, a brief intimation of future raptures, ecstasies, riches, glory ...

Yet, even as she was touched by that premonition of happiness, she felt a sense of loss. How wonderful it would have been to be a saint.

* * *

Next door Margaret Fell was pacing up and down in her room, going through agonies of guilt, a torment of doubt. It was inconceivable, unimaginable, but had John Sawrey decided to hang that poor boy only to thwart her? It could not be! Sawrey was a vicious man, but there were limits to what a judge could do! Yet she had no doubt he had made his announcement only to force her to give up her efforts on behalf of the children. Was he right? Was there any point in her going on?

Not only her reason seemed to persuade her to desist, all that was delicate and fainthearted in her cried out for solace, for deliverance, as she paced back and forth, fighting her tears. Suddenly she had such a sense of confinement that she snuffed the candle and opened the window.

The night outside, its radiant immensity, was a comfort at first; then she remembered standing like this the night after George's arrival at Swarthmoor Hall, when a sense of minuteness had induced her to whisper, 'God? Look at me: it's me, Maggie ...' She remembered the dream: the door opening at the foot of her bed, the young god wading towards her from the ocean of light.

Had it all been the moon-sick fancy of an aging woman? 'Oh, God,' she whispered, closing her eyes, 'God, God ...' Then, suddenly, there was the indomitable challenge again, '*All He has is thee.*'

She gazed at the sky. It was madness to presume that she, fly-speck on a planet among the millions of stars, should be a representative of the God who had conceived the Milky Way, the swarms of suns spinning in the darkness of the void. *All He has is thee.* The presumption of it! The heresy! Who was this boy, this uneducated weaver's son, to proclaim that it was not man who needed God, but God who needed man? *All He has is thee.* Preposterous! Blasphemous! Never before had she known such

yearning for the security of dogma, the sheltering arms of the church; but, alas, all those considerations conspired only to keep her away from the boy about to be hanged. She understood why he had struck her, or thought she did; but even if she did not, some inexorable pull drew her to that lonely child pressed against the wall, facing with his one suppurating eye the terror of death, alone. She had to go back to him, she had to.

That night she barely slept. Each time she was about to slide into sleep, there was that poor child, pressed against the wall, snarling at her, as white as a sheet. 'Oh, God, God, God of love, Jesus, His loving Son: mercy, mercy!' She whispered the prayer each time she woke from her uneasy sleep, but there was no answer, no heavenly certitude came to her. She was left with nothing but her own personal tenderness.

At an earlier hour than usual, she found herself with Ann in front of the desk in the little office in the gateway, facing the warden. He heard her out, his eyes expressionless, his face set. 'Mistress Fell,' he said at last, 'the boy will be hanged whether you persist in your efforts or not. He was condemned to death, after a proper trial, by Justice Sawrey. The matter of pardon was never even discussed because in his case a petition for clemency was bound to be rejected.'

'Why? What has he done?'

'He is a murderer,' the warden said coldly. 'A particularly vicious one. He was an orphan adopted by Ebenezer Jones, Burgomaster of Cark. You may have heard of the case. Mayor Jones was a wealthy, highly respected merchant known for his charity. He chose the boy because of his intelligence, and was murdered for his pains. God, in His wisdom which passeth all understanding, had seen fit to make him choose a monster.'

'Nonsense!' she cried. 'No child is a monster! Something must have happened. Didn't the boy say *why* he did it? What evidence was there that he did it at all?'

'Oh, he did it, all right,' the warden said. 'He never bothered to deny it. He smashed his father's skull with a poker, in the man's study, one night after supper.'

'But why? There must have been a reason!'

The warden looked at her wearily; she sensed his exasperation. 'It may be difficult for you to accept, Madam, but there are creatures in this world who do not deserve the word "human". The boy is a monster of viciousness and depravity, and I wholeheartedly agree with Justice Sawrey's verdict.'

'But his eye? What happened to his eye?'

'That, Madam, was struck out in the fight.' The warden picked up his quill again.

'So my appealing for a pardon would make no difference to his fate?'

'I'm afraid not.' He hesitated, then added, 'But it might affect yours, Madam.'

'Mine?'

He glanced at the door. 'Mayor Jones had many friends in this town. So has Mistress Jones, and she is a very temperamental lady; Welsh, you know. Your interference has already raised her hackles. She is, understandably enough, adamant that the boy gets his deserts. You, a wife yourself, will appreciate that.'

'I certainly do not!' she said angrily; but she felt a doubt even as she said it. How could she know what a woman felt who saw her husband murdered by a child she loved?

'Believe me, Madam, for you to make an official appeal on behalf of the boy would not only be ineffectual, it would be most unwise.'

She rose. 'Thank thee for thy kind concern, Hyman.' She did not wait for him to rise and bow; she turned and left.

The jailer escorted them down to the bottom level and let them into the children's cell. Intuition told her to ignore the boy, who instantly got up and went back to the wall to stand there, scowling. She resumed her efforts to make the children sing; the moment she raised her voice, the madwomen began to shriek again. But she persevered, while the boy glowered at her, mouthing foul words whenever he caught her looking in his direction. This child was not a monster; there must have been a reason for his attack on his adoptive father. But his guilt or innocence seemed unimportant. All she cared about was how to comfort him.

But how to comfort a person who knew he was going to be hanged, and this a boy only eleven years old? What was it like to know that in less than a month's time you would be no more? It was unimaginable. How could she reach him? He would have no part of her commiseration. But she did not want to commiserate with him; what she wanted was to take him in her arms, as she would one of her own children, transmit to him something she could not put into words.

But she could not bring herself to do it. Before she blew her whistle that night to call the jailer, she went to the boy

and said matter-of-factly, 'I will be with thee when — when it happens.'

He glared at her with chilling hatred. 'Go bugger thyself.'

She turned away.

On the way back to the inn it occurred to her that maybe it was not enough to tell a child that she would be there, as if her presence were a precious gift. She should try and save his life, ask for a pardon. She knew enough about the judicial process to realize that if she were to write to the Lord Justices in London, her petition would not be considered until months later, long after the boy was dead. She should write to Cromwell himself.

That night, after supper, she wrote the letter. She decided to go for that of God in Cromwell without paying heed to the proper form of address. So she wrote, '*Dear heart! As the father of thy people, I come to plead with thee for one of thy youngest children . . .*'

It became a long letter; she finished it just before the candle gave out. The problem was how to despatch it so it would get to him in time. Perhaps the warden would despatch it for her, if he could do so without compromising himself.

She knelt at the side of her bed. 'Dear God, please, please be with him tonight, give him comfort . . .'

She stopped. She had prayed with utter sincerity, but all it achieved was to comfort herself. There was only one answer to that prayer: '*All He has is thee.*' If she wanted God to be with that boy, she should be there herself. There was no other way: she must move in with the children.

* * *

The next morning, Ann Traylor's instant reaction was: No! Enough is enough! Let her move in alone! She tried desperately to think of an excuse for not joining in this latest extravagance; Margaret Fell forestalled her by stating that she intended to spend the nights in prison alone. When Ann protested, she ordered her not to be foolish, and to stay at the inn.

So Ann accompanied her mistress to the prison with, as a beckoning promise at the end of the day, the vision of having the rooms at the inn entirely to herself. She would sup alone, write in her diary undisturbed, be free to do whatever she wished. It was a vision of such delight that the day passed slowly. The children were apathetic and snotty and filthy and unresponsive as always; the one-eyed boy stood against the wall, glowering at them,

muttering obscenities; her mistress persevered with the lessons and with her efforts to make them sing the madrigal which had made them the laughingstock of the prison. The very notion of laughter in a place like this was ludicrous, but the moment Margaret Fell raised her genteel soprano to lead the children in 'The Andalusian Merchant', all the invisible prisoners in the dungeons roared with laughter, magnified by the well of the stairs as by a colossal speaking-trumpet. Everybody knew the song by now; lewd versions of it were shouted at them from the passages when they were spotted on the landings. The only ones in the prison unable to catch the tune were the children; all they did was gape, mouths open, eyes as dull as pewter, at the elegant lady squatting in the straw, carolling '*These things are wondrous, yet more wondrous I, whose heart with fear doth freeze, with love doth fry.*' The words themselves were a mockery in the presence of a child having an attack of diarrhoea in a corner, of another lying sick in one of the cavities hewn out in the wall, of a boy about to be hanged. But Margaret Fell did not seem to be aware of anything incongruous; her determination seemed part of the indomitable arrogance of the English gentry: to the mistress of Swarthmoor Hall, who had never been thwarted in any whim which caught her fancy, it was inconceivable that her ministrations to the poor should be rejected and doomed to failure.

To Ann, as she leaned against the bars of the cell, the mere thought of what would happen to the one-eyed boy was horrifying. To try to humour him, as Margaret Fell was doing, was repugnant and painful. There he stood, a filthy human beast about to be slaughtered, locked up at the bottom of a well, dragging chains that had chaffed the skin off his ankles and caused running sores; and there sat a lady presuming to have become part of his world by taking off her jewellery. To importune the boy, who must be going through torments of terror and apprehension, with melodious notions about his wondrous heart alternatively freezing and frying seemed an obscenity. In a few weeks' time, at sunrise, his body would drop, his neck would snap, his heart would freeze forever after an agonising struggle with death at the end of a rope. Each time Ann looked at him she saw the dropping body, the desperate struggle, the swinging rope slowly coming to a halt, like a stopped pendulum. It made her feel that she was an intruder, a fraud. The least offensive thing she could do was to make herself as inconspicuous as possible while waiting for her mistress to accept defeat.

As she sat there leaning against the bars throughout that interminable day, she had plenty of time to think. The truth, she concluded, was simple. Life, as revealed all around her, was a hideous nightmare. The only escape was to grab each fleeting chance for happiness, any opportunity for joy that might present itself, knowing all the time that this pit of the damned was the true reality. Whatever might happen to her in the future, she would never be able to forget this prison. It would be with her always, like the stench that she could not close out as she sat there dreaming dreams of canopied beds, marble floors inlaid black and white, gilded leather covering the walls, hundreds of candles in crystal chandeliers, velvet gowns, servants, greyhounds, cockatoos in jewelled cages. What she should really do the moment she was free was to find herself a rich old merchant who would adore her, indulge her slightest whim, give her riches, luxury, freedom to meet anyone she liked: young noblemen, officers . . .

Never before had she thought of the future in those terms. All her life she had pursued virtue, chastity, charity. By entering Lancaster Castle, she had thought, she was following Christ's example. Not in her wildest dreams had it occurred to her that within days, robbed of all her pious fancies and girlish ideals, she would cynically consider hunting down a rich old man. What had happened to the holy enthusiasm she had felt when Margaret Fell first mentioned the suffering of prisoners? She yearned to go home to the inn; only by writing it all down could she hope to answer that question.

When at last Margaret Fell said, 'Well, Ann, I think it's time to leave,' she leaped eagerly to her feet; her heart sank when she heard her mistress add, 'Be good now, children; I'll be back.'

She was coming too! She had had second thoughts, the pretentious queen! Ann fumed with helpless rage as they stood waiting for the jailer to appear in response to the whistle. He seemed to take a long time; when finally the light of his lantern came swinging down the passage and the madwomen next door began their mindless crowing and shrieking at his approach, tears of disappointment welled in Ann's eyes. Why had she changed her mind? Why, why?

There could only be one explanation: she was afraid. At the last moment, the idea of having to spend the night in the dungeon was too much for her delicate sensibilities. Then why had she raised the children's hopes so cruelly? Why had she made such a song and dance of 'her duty to share their world'? It had all been

a rich woman's fancy, the last semblance of selflessness was ripped off her example of Christian charity. Ann forgot about the earlier hopes that her mistress might accept defeat; all she could think of at that moment was the cruel disappointment of seeing her dream of freedom come to naught. Oh, how she hated her! How she despised her imperious fickleness!

It seemed to her, in her state of angry rebellion, that even the turnkey was derogatory. Margaret Fell had dramatically announced her decision to stay overnight that morning; to turn tail now did not improve her standing with the prison staff, who thus far had been surly but respectful. When, as they appeared on the landing, an uncouth voice bellowed from one of the passages, 'Hey! How's thy frying heart, Fogo?!' the turnkey shouted, 'Shut yer trap or I'll Fogo thee, bull-sucker!' This time he offered no apology for his language.

Outside, the ramparts of the castle were orange with the sunset; in the alleys of the city twilight had already settled. They did not speak as they walked, swiftly and some distance apart, to the Three Swans; when they entered the taproom, the sound of buzzing voices ceased abruptly. Margaret Fell went to fetch the key and order their supper in an oppressive silence.

Normally, they chatted as they went about their dark, empty rooms, lighting the candles; this time not a word was spoken. Margaret Fell seemed preoccupied. It must be a novel experience to her to give up, she obviously did not like it. Supper was served; the maid left with the tray, they joined hands for grace.

The moment she held her mistress' hands in hers, Ann felt a twinge of contrition. She did not know whether it was the mere touch of Margaret's hands or the fact that they trembled slightly, but suddenly she was sorry for the woman. Even though she had given up, she *had* done a courageous and unprecedented thing by going down into those dungeons on an errand of mercy. Rather than blame her for fickleness, she should try to revive the admiration she had once felt for her. She opened her eyes; the face opposite her was a mask of such sorrow that she was about to ask, 'Margaret Fell? What is the matter?' Then her mistress opened her eyes and smiled. 'Well,' she said, 'I must be too tired to eat. I think I had better go before it gets too late.' She rose. 'I'll just pack a bag; it was foolish of me not to have thought of it this morning.'

It came as such a surprise that Ann found herself tongue-tied with remorse and confusion. She helped her pack, trying all the

while to think of something to say; when she faced her at the door, she blurted out, 'Please, let me come with thee! Please! Thou canst not go there alone, it's too late to be on the streets . . .'

Margaret Fell, pale in the candlelight, shook her head. 'No, my dear; this is my battle, not thine. Have a good rest. And bring me some food for the children in the morning. Good night, God bless; I'll have the landlord call a chair.'

'God bless . . .'

She should have run after her, but she stood in the doorway, listening to her rapid steps going down the passage and the stairs. The din of voices from the taproom became louder when the downstairs door was opened, then it fell silent. She heard the door close; the voices started up again, excitedly.

She turned back into the room. The sudden emptiness made her feel forlorn and ill at ease. To eat alone, which she had dreamed of all day as a feast of languorous delight, turned out to be bleak and mournful. When finally she sat down with her diary she felt constrained, as if the presence of her mistress were more oppressive in her absence. Why had Margaret changed her mind? Or had she truly forgotten to pack a valise? The valise seemed incongruous: did she expect to lie down in that filthy straw in her nightgown? She should have taken a blanket!

For a moment Ann considered going after her with one, if only as far as the warden's office; but by the time she arrived, Margaret Fell would already have descended into the dungeons.

She could not get her out of her mind. She was haunted by the image of her trying to sleep in that foul-smelling cell, among those filthy, vermin-ridden children.

In the end, all she managed to write was, '*Tonight M.F. moved in with the children in Lancaster Castle.*' After some brooding, she added, '*after all*'.

She sat staring at the page. Would there be rats down there that came out at night? 'Oh, my God,' she thought, 'help her! Have mercy on her! Have mercy on *me*!'

* * *

Margaret Fell had returned to the Three Swans in momentary faintheartedness. The day had been an exhausting one; it was proving so difficult to make contact with the children; she had the feeling that she made no impression on them whatsoever. But when she had taken Ann's hands in hers for grace, she had found

that they trembled. The girl was troubled by her change of heart; it must be a deep disappointment to her. So, with wooden bravery, she had suddenly decided to return.

She managed to hold firm to her determination all the way to the castle; when she entered the office, however, she found a stranger sitting behind the warden's desk. It might have been the darkness that made him look unprepossessing; the light of the candles on the desk sharpened his hawklike features and seemed to give an unusual brilliance to his oddly wide-set eyes. Only when he rose did she realise he was a hunchback.

'Good evening, Madam. Henry Hathaway, assistant warden.' He made a crooked little bow. For some reason he frightened her.

'Good evening,' she said, as pleasantly as she could. 'I am the wife of Chief Justice Fell. As you must have heard, I have permission from Warden Farragut to spend the night with the children.'

'Yes, I know all about it.' The hunchback seemed to think it amusing. 'Dr. Withers has also been informed. You will be meeting him later tonight.'

'Is he a surgeon?'

'No, he is the spiritual adviser of the inmates of this prison. He will be concerned with the boy in your cell who is due for execution. He told me before we went down tonight that he plans to pay you a visit if time permits.'

'I see . . .' She became aware that someone was rummaging through her valise and saw it was a man she had not seen before, obviously a turnkey of the night shift. 'Warden Farragut ceased inspecting my basket some days ago,' she said sharply.

The man, sallow-faced and cavernous, did not seem to have heard. She watched, shaken and embarrassed, as his hands went on searching the contents of her valise, fumbling among the intimacies of her night apparel and toiletries.

'It is regrettable, Madam,' Hathaway said, still with that irrepressible smile of amusement, 'but at night time we have to be especially careful. Someone might grab your valise and use its contents for his own purposes. Anything in there?' His voice when he addressed the turnkey was not amused.

'No sir. Only candles. Do we allow candles?'

The hunchback looked at her, and there was that unpleasant smile again. She did not know what made him so loathsome; surely it was not his deformity. The thought made her submit

more meekly to the search than she would otherwise have done.

'In your case, Madam,' the hunchback said, 'we'll let you keep the candles; normally, we would confiscate them. Danger of fire, you know. But as you are going to spend the night down there, let's allow you the comfort of some light. You will need it.'

Something in the way he said it made it sound like a threat. 'Why?' she asked, frowning.

'Rats, for one thing.' His smile grew; his wet lips glistened in the candlelight.

'I — I should like to go down now.' She tried to sound unconcerned, but the mention of rats was unnerving. He had probably said it only to frighten her; his ill will seemed obvious now.

'Certainly. Good night, Madam. Happy dreams.'

'Is — is your man going to accompany me?'

The hunchback's face was a caricature of regret. 'Alas, Madam, we do not have sufficient staff at night to provide you with an escort. But surely you know the way by now?'

'In that case, could I have a lantern?'

He threw up his hands in commiseration. 'Ah, I wish I could oblige, Madam, but I'm afraid the one available lantern was taken by Dr. Withers. You have candles, haven't you? Parsons! Light one for M'Lady.'

The cavernous man took one of the candles from her valise, without asking, and lit it from the one on the desk. He handed it to her without a word.

She felt a momentary confusion. She had to hold the candle, shield the flame against the draught and carry the valise; it would be awkward and difficult, once she started on her way down.

'Parsons, open the door for M'Lady! Good night, Madam, see you tomorrow morning. Or are you planning to stay with us permanently?'

She did not deign to answer that. 'Good night, Mr. Hathaway,' she said coldly. She nodded at the turnkey, who held the door open for her, and stepped out into the dark cave of the gateway. Instantly the draught blew out her candle; luckily, the entrance to the dungeons was marked by a lantern. As she approached, she saw there was a guard on duty; during the daytime the jailers had their own key. The guard lifted the lantern and shone the light in her face.

'Good evening,' she said.

Without replying, he inserted the key in the lock of the grille

with a rattle that echoed in the well beyond. The gate swung open, and she stepped inside.

The stench that met her as she approached the black pit of the stairs seemed even more repugnant than it was in the daytime; the very idea of having to spend the night at the bottom of that black, stinking shaft made her shudder. She tarried for a moment at the top of the steps, stricken with apprehension. Then she lit the candle with the tinderbox she had, wisely, put in the pocket of her cloak as she left the inn. The feeble, flickering light barely reached her feet, she would have to go carefully once she started her descent.

Never before had she felt such abject fear; she could not put the rats out of her mind. In the past, the mere mention of a mouse had been enough to give her the irrepressible urge to jump on to a chair and scream for help. She had never thought about rats in the prison, she had never seen one there. Now the idea that she would have to lie down in the straw to sleep while there might be rats burrowing all around her was petrifying. 'Oh, God, God,' she prayed, in a whisper, 'help me, please help me . . .' But the instant response to her fervent plea was the thought: 'Which God? Where?' Standing there, gazing into the well below, she suddenly felt overcome by an angry scorn for George Fox and his fancies. If only God had been allowed to remain firmly established in the heavens, gazing down upon her with the fatherly concern of One who counted hairs and watched over each sparrow, she would have descended into that black pit like Daniel into the lion's den, whereas now . . . What comfort could she derive from the small, powerless voice within her, urging, '*Go, please, Maggie, Go . . .*'? The voice of her fear was much stronger; anything was stronger than the pitiful whisper that pleaded with her to go to those children. Why should she? What were they to her? She had tried her best, hadn't she? Was there any hope she would ever get through to them? They were beyond human reach. And that horrible boy, spewing obscenities . . .

. *All He has is thee.*

There was the boy about to be hanged, younger than her own son George. If he were her son, would she go down. Of course she would. Well, he was God's child, and the only way his Father could reach him was through her. 'All right, God,' she thought, setting her jaw. 'Here we go, sink or swim together.' But it seemed that God, if He were indeed within her, was as apprehensive as she. Once she returned to the world, she would have a

word with George Fox and tell him that she had tried out his fancy concept and found it worthless. 'Come on, Maggie,' she murmured. 'Stop shilly-shallying.'

She swallowed and groped for the first step with her foot.

That first step turned out to be the most difficult; once she had discovered the candle flame would survive as long as she went slowly, she took heart. She found that if she concentrated on going down those steps to the exclusion of everything else, the whole thing became possible. Gradually, as she went down, step by step, she gained confidence. But when she reached the first landing she was greeted by a storm of catcalls, whistles, boos and shrieked obscenities from the passages. It had happened before, but always in the presence of a jailer with a lantern; this time she froze with fright. Whether it was a jerky movement of her own or the draught from the passages, suddenly the candle went out. The laughter it caused was terrifying; it seemed as if the whole prison shook with roars of malevolent glee. A voice yelled as from the bottom of a pit, 'Hey! Honey bear! How's thy frying Fogo?!'

The laughter doubled in volume; she stood in the darkness shaking like a leaf, about to burst into tears and flee back upstairs. A thought flashed through her mind, 'That of God. Appeal to that of God in them.' She did not stop to consider how grotesque the notion was; pinned against the wall, she cried, her voice shrill and puny in the roar of their laughter, 'Friends! Friends, for the love of God, I am here to help the children! Please, *please* help me!'

She hardly knew what she cried, but it seemed to catch the interest of those invisible people. The sudden silence gave her the courage to cry, 'Down there is a boy who is going to be hanged! He's only eleven! We cannot leave him to face that alone, *somebody* has to go there, somebody has to be with him! Please, please help me! I am so afraid!' Oh, she should not have said that! She should not have told those people how frightened she was.

A voice yelled from one of the passages, 'He's a murderer!'

Without thinking, she cried back, 'I don't care what he has done! What any of you have done! God is love! And His love can only reach that boy through me, through — through all of you!' She stood there, trembling, steeling herself for the roar of derision that would follow. But there was no response.

She managed to light the candle despite the shaking of her hands. When the flame had grown bright enough to reveal the first step, she continued on her way, bracing herself for the on-

slaught of the next landing. But they seemed to have howled their fill; she was allowed to pass without being harried. Shakily she pressed on towards the bottom of the pit, preparing herself for the shrieks of the lunatic women.

But whether it was the darkness or whether most of them were asleep at this hour, only one of the tragic creatures stood at the bars and stretched out a claw towards her as she passed with her candle. 'Dearie,' a voice whispered. 'Dearie, love me! Love me too . . .' She hurried past, her arms covered with goose pimples.

At last she reached the end of the passage, the dungeon of the children, home. As she fumbled with the key in the lock, she wondered how a place that had at one time filled her with such revulsion could suddenly feel like home; then, as she opened the door with the screeching hinges, she saw the light of her candle glisten in the eyes of a child. It was the little girl, who came crawling towards her in the straw; the others lay curled up like animals in the centre of the cell, huddled together for warmth. She heard the rattle of a chain, lifted the candle and saw the one-eyed boy pressing himself against the wall again, in the spot where he always stood. 'Well, children,' she said cheerfully, 'here I am. I told you I'd be back.' She put down the valise, stuck her hand through the bars of the door and locked it from the outside. She put the key in her bodice, bent down to pick up her valise and jumped back with a squeal when she saw a small black thing jump and scurry away into the straw. 'Oh. God . . .' she whispered, her hand on her heart, eyes closed, leaning against the bars. 'Oh God, dear God — I can't. I can't . . .' She heard a high, snickering sound, opened her eyes and saw the boy grin at her malevolently. For a moment she stiffened, then she said quietly, 'Well, I am happy to see that thou canst laugh.' It was a foolish thing to say, certainly not the way to endear herself to him, but she needed all her self-control at that moment not to flee. How silly, how stupid that her entire concern should come to naught because of her terror of mice! For it must have been a mouse. Rats were *much* bigger, and certainly not shy like that. It had been a harmless, curious little mouse at least as frightened as she was. She went to the centre of the cell and, after wrapping her skirt tightly around her ankles, sat down with the children despite the certainty that the moment she did so rats would scurry towards her and scrabble inside her petticoats. She opened her valise, produced an empty bottle she had brought, stuck it in the straw and put the

candle in it. 'Well, children,' she said briskly, 'here we are. Now let's see. What shall we do first?'

Judged by their responsiveness, the huddled forms in the straw were fast asleep. Only the little girl, dull-eyed, her grimy face covered with sores and snot, gaped at her, breathing through her mouth with a snoring sound. Poor little thing; how long had she spent locked up in this cellar, away from light and air, from life? 'Let's play a game,' she said. 'Knowest thou the game "I spy with my little eye"?' The child said nothing, just stared at her vacuously.

'I'll show thee how it goes.' She looked at the bottle, then she said gaily, 'I spy with my little eye something beginning with "B" —'

'Ballocks.'

The boy. Oh dear, her choice of game had been unfortunate, considering he had only one eye. But this kind of delicate feeling was ridiculous under the circumstances. 'Bottle,' she said to the little girl in front of her. 'B — bottle. Wouldst thou like to try? "I spy with my little eye something beginning with —" what?'

'She's a mute,' the boy said.

'Oh — I see . . .'

Suddenly there was a movement among the huddled shapes in the straw. One of the little boys lifted his head, listening. He scrambled to his feet, the others followed suit and the lot of them rushed towards the bars, trying to peer outside. Even the little girl scrambled towards the gate on hands and knees, to try and peerd down the dark passage. There was a sound of voices and a loud clattering, as if a cart were being wheeled down the passage. There came a light, then the angular silhouette of a baker's cart pushed by a man in rags, accompanied by a small, dishevelled woman of indeterminate age carrying a lantern. The children pressed themselves against the bars, stretched out their hands towards the cart; the woman suspended the lantern from a crook above the cart, opened the lid and started to spoon something from a barrel inside into a bowl. She turned around to hand it to one of the children, who all squealed and waved their hands and tried to grab it; she lashed at them with her ladle and gave it to the farthest boy. She turned to fill the next bowl, but the children could not wait that long. They set upon the boy, who spat and screamed and kicked trying to defend his bowl, spilling some of its contents in the straw. The woman cried, 'Here, you, varmint!' holding out another bowl; the pack of voracious urchins rushed

back to the bars. Open-mouthed, aghast, Margaret watched their ferocious fight that came to an end only when each of them had a bowl, having lost most of the contents through their senseless, hideous violence. The spectacle was so pitiful that she barely had eyes for the woman, who peered at her through the bars and said, 'If you want food, you'll have to pay garnish, M'Lady.'

'Garnish?'

'You don't expect to get fed for nothing, do you, now?'

'Oh, I'll — I'm not hungry, thank you.'

The woman shrugged her shoulders and turned away. 'Geddup!' she cried; the man in rags turned around between the shafts and started to pull the cart back along the passage. The lunatic women welcomed him with bangings and raucous cries; they sounded like famished beasts of prey. Margaret closed her eyes, overcome by hopelessness. She had never quite realised before how horrendous this place was, how futile her effort to relieve some of its horror. It was not fear that would defeat her, it was hopelessness, the conviction that she would never be able to change this place, that nothing could, that the one thing likely to happen was that it would change her. She belonged in her own house, with her own children, her own husband . . . She felt a sudden, desperate yearning for Thomas, for the baby, the delicate fragrance of fresh bedsheets, the —

Something made her look up. Behind the bars, peering down at her, stood a white-haired man in black.

'I am Dr. Withers,' he said dourly. 'You have the key, I believe?'

'Yes . . .'

'Pray let me in. I am here to see the boy Henry Jones.'

She opened the gate for him with alacrity, for he was a harbinger of her own world. But when he stepped inside, his antagonism became obvious. He was a tall, stoop-shouldered man who would have looked forbidding under any circumstances; in the ghostly light of his lantern he looked the image of wrath. His cold, fanatical eyes gazed down on her with such hostility that she almost backed away. 'What business is this of yours, Madam?' he asked harshly.

'I beg your pardon?'

He closed his eyes in exasperation. Then he opened them again and said in a voice taut with self-control, 'I heard what you said on the stairs, and you heard my answer: this boy is a murderer. Do you know the punishment for blasphemy, Madam?'

'Blasphemy?'

'What you said was blasphemy. Only faith in Jesus' atonement saves, nothing else. He is the one to transmit God's love to the world; no one else can usurp His place.'

'But I do not intend to. All I wanted to say — '

'Don't try and defend yourself, woman!' he cried. 'I will be lenient this time! I will forget! But do not endeavour to convince me that you did not intend to say what I heard you say! Or that you did not know that the entire prison can hear every word spoken on those stairs!'

'I didn't know! My candle blew out and — '

'Sinner, do not defend yourself!' he cried. There was something majestic about his anger; she gave up trying to convince him. 'As I have said: this time I will be lenient. But do not spout blasphemy again within these walls or I will be forced to report you.' He gave her a peculiar look and added, 'I will be lenient, that is, on condition that you shall now repent. Do you repent?'

She looked at him in bewilderment. Her first impulse was: go for that of God in him. But something about his eyes told her that for once this was hopeless. 'What would you have me repent, Friend?' she asked, trying to convey to him a sense of good will.

'Repent claiming that you should have been singled out to convey God's love to these children!'

'I would repent had I said that, Friend.'

'That is what I heard you say, woman!'

'I did not say that I had been singled out. I singled myself out.'

'I would not go on trying to defend myself with sophistry,' he said, suddenly without passion. 'There is no argument here. Either repent, or I will report you as a blasphemer.'

'I repent for anything I may have said that offended thee.'

'Not me! God!'

She knew she was taking a risk, but she could not help herself. 'Friend,' she pleaded, 'God is love! How could His love become a reality to these children if it weren't through thee or me?'

He stared at her for a moment in silence, then he said in a tone of finality, 'I will speak to the boy now.' She stepped aside; he waded through the straw towards the boy, who stood with his back to the wall, waiting for him defiantly.

'Henry Jones,' he intoned, 'thou art condemned to be hanged

by the neck on the first Saturday of next month, at sunrise. I am here to prepare thee. Thou knowest that without faith in Christ Jesus and His atonement of all thy sins, there is no hope for thy soul.'

'Ballocks,' the boy said.

The old man did not seem to have heard. 'Unless thou throwest thyself upon the mercy of our Saviour, thou wilt burn in hell forevermore. Dost thou know that? Dost thou believe?'

'Shit,' the boy said.

This time it dawned on the minister that he was faced by a rebel. 'Dost thou *want* to go to hell, boy?'

'Any place where I won't meet thee!' The boy's voice was high and childish, heartbreaking in its lonely defiance.

The minister was taken aback, momentarily. '*What* didst thou say?'

'I don't want to go to heaven and meet thee there!' the boy cried; then the minister struck him in the face with his fist. The child squawked and crumpled into the straw. When Margaret saw the man lift his foot to kick him, she cried, 'No, no!' She rushed towards the child and threw herself between the two of them, shielding him with her body. It was spontaneous and utterly sincere, yet she felt detached, as if in a charade. It did not seem real, none of it did.

The old man looked at her with cold, impersonal hostility. She waited for him to pronounce her doom, but he said nothing. He turned around and waded through the straw to the gate. He pulled it open, let himself out, shut it again, threw the key inside and was gone. She looked down on the huddled form in the straw. He did not move; she thought the priest had knocked him unconscious until she realised he had fallen asleep where he fell.

Suddenly she felt completely disoriented. For a moment the whole dungeon swirled around her; she closed her eyes and rested her head against the wall. 'Oh, God, dear God . . .' she thought, but she did not finish the prayer. She was crushed by the heartlessness, the cruelty, the suffering. She had never known that this could happen to human beings, not even after reading those hundreds of letters from imprisoned Friends. She felt as if all hope, all faith in goodness, beauty, all the gentle graces by which she had been sheltered all her life had been nothing but a dream. It became clear to her that it was not this dungeon, this brutality that was the dream, but Swarthmoor Hall.

She looked at the sleeping boy. She wanted to touch him, in a gesture of tenderness, but could not bring herself to do it. Here she was, pretending to embody God's love, and the idea of touching him, or any of them, filled her with such repugnance that she could not bring herself to do it. They had been symbols to her, not real human beings. She herself had been a symbol of mercy, descending among symbols of suffering with a symbolic message of love. She was nothing but a rich lady doing good.

She went to find the key in the straw and waded towards the other children. As she sat down beside them, she remembered the rats, but her fear of them had dimmed. Weariness overwhelmed her; she closed her eyes, her hands in her lap, and the association with meeting for worship brought back, with almost unbearable poignancy, the memory of other times she had sat like this, under the illusion that she was experiencing the presence of God. It had all been a figment of her own imagination. She could not have sensed any presence of God, for there was no God. There could not be, for the God of righteousness personified by the priest and the God of love she had imagined were irreconcilable. It was impossible that the Spirit which had urged the Israelites to massacre women and children had anything in common with the loving Father Christ talked about. She had achieved her goal at last. She was free. Free of convention, tradition, inherited beliefs, free to face the truth. Well, here it was: tenderness, compassion, love, honour, hope — everything that had once made life worthwhile was a luxury, a dream. Reality was this. All she need do was look about her. But what was the point of an existence like this? Where was the sense of it? She covered her face with her hands. There was only one word to sum up the human experience as it had finally been revealed to her: absurd. The truth about life was that it was absurd.

Suddenly she jumped with fright as something touched her hand. She opened her eyes and saw it was the little mute girl, gazing at her, open-mouthed, with dull, mindless eyes.

She managed to smile. She wanted to speak to her, but remembered the child could not hear. It was all fake anyhow, for in her heart she shrank away from the horrible creature with disgust, hoping she would not touch her again. The child stank horribly; even in the feeble light of the candle she could see lice in her hair. If ever their bodies were to come in contact . . . Then the child snuggled up against her.

All that was fastidious in her cried out in repugnance, urging her to push the child away. But after a moment she relaxed and let her be. If she could give this poor, idiot baby a brief illusion of a motherly presence sheltering her from harm, why not? What was there left to defend? Even if this were no more than a mindless little animal's search for warmth, why not give it? With a sense of farewell, she put her arms around the child and pressed the filthy little head against her chest. She sat watching the lice until the candle flame twitched, sputtered and died, and darkness engulfed the dungeon.

She did not know how long she sat there in the dark, her arms around the little girl, waiting to feel the first crawling of lice on her scalp; they must be climbing all over her by now, seeking her hair. Suddenly one of the madwomen in the next cell started to clamour; as she looked up, she saw a light flicker on the bars. It grew brighter, throwing slowly drifting shadows on the wall opposite; it stopped just short of where she could see it and a man appeared at the door.

'Good evening, Mistress Fell. I hope I didn't disturb your sleep?'

It was John Sawrey. She was relieved it was he, not the clergyman or the woman with the cart. He stood there, small and elegant with his plumed hat and red cloak; the lamplight flashed on the buckles on his shoes as he moved closer to peer though the bars. 'Is there anything I can do for you? Can I have them bring a blanket? Some fresh water?'

'No, thank you, Mr. Sawrey. It's very kind of you.'

He looked at her, his face noncomittal, but his eyes seemed to show a concern that surprised her. 'I'm ashamed that you should live in such filthy conditions. I'll tell Mistress Fraley to change the straw tomorrow.'

'Oh — thank you.' It seemed uncharacteristic of him, this sudden solicitousness. He must be up to something; her relief turned into wariness.

As if he had read her thoughts, he gave her a faint smile and said, 'You must wonder at my concern.'

'Indeed.' There seemed to be no point in dissimulation.

'During Hilary this prison is my responsibility, and in a sense I am your husband's representative. I am as concerned about you as I would want him to be about my own good wife during his tour of duty.'

'You're very kind.'

'Are there any mesages I can give him? Please consider me at your disposal.'

'Thank you, for the moment I have all I need.'

'Very well, then.' He pulled on his gloves. I'll make it a point to visit you every day about this hour, if that would be convenient.'

'Oh — oh, yes.'

'Should there be any problems at any time, please do not hesitate to have me called. I am residing in the castle during Hilary. Both wardens know where to find me.'

'Thank you.' She did not know what else to say.

'Good night, Madam. Your obedient servant.' He swept his hat and made a leg; his shadow on the wall looked huge. She heard him mutter, 'All right'; someone lifted the lantern. The next moment he was gone; the poor souls in the cell next door jabbered briefly at his passing; the light drew away, and all was dark again. The child she was cradling had not stirred, nor had any of the others.

He left her in a pensive mood. His courtesy and concern, however calculating, had somehow alleviated her desperation; there now seemed to be a ray of hope. She sat pondering on it for a while and realised that her suddenly taking heart was brought about by his promise to have the straw changed. That such a simple thing could make such a difference! She wondered why she herself had not thought of it; for some reason she had considered everything in the dungeon to be as permanent and unchangeable as the rock out of which it was hewn. It had never occurred to her that the straw could be changed; of course it was the first thing she should have arranged for! She might have to pay Mistress Fraley garnish for it, but that she would gladly do. How was it possible that she had not thought of it herself?

As she sat there in the darkness, with the child on her lap, she felt moved to go into meeting quite alone. She relaxed her body, emptied her head of thoughts, even the small babbling ones, until she sat there blank and passive, waiting for that of God to rise within her.

What rose was a thought. A cold thought, almost angry: *'What is so godly about sharing their filth?'*

It startled her; she had expected something noble, soothing. Looked at coolly and without religious rapture, there was indeed nothing godly about her sitting there waiting to feel the first lice

on her scalp. Rather than sharing their filth, she should make them share her cleanliness.

That of God within her manifested itself in the decision to clean out this pigsty first thing in the morning. She suddenly was sure that Christ, had He been a woman, would have done the same.

CHAPTER THREE

THAT night John Sawrey had himself and the constable taken by Warden Hathaway to the provost's quarters, for that was where he intended to lodge from now on, be it in acute discomfort.

The provost's quarters, two triangular rooms with narrow windows in the southeast tower, were notorious among judges. In winter they were impossible to heat, in the summer they acted as a receptacle for all the odours that rose from the bowels of the castle. None of the judges during his three-month stint as provost ever availed himself of the quarters; everybody preferred to stay at an inn. But now John Sawrey had told the Fell woman, on the spur of the moment, that he would be available at all hours; as a consequnce he found himself facing the dismal prospect of having to lodge for the remaining months in the dank, musty, pie-shaped little rooms in the tower. Even Hathaway, not a man to be easily surprised, was baffled by this sudden desire on his part to avail himself of the lumpy canopied bed, the rickety chairs and the threadbare, rat-shredded rugs of the provost's quarters.

That the constable would accept this sudden deterioration in his lodgings without comment was a foregone conclusion, he never protested. But someone would have to be found to do the cleaning and look after their meals. Mistress Fraley had her hands full, but perhaps Mistress Farragut, the day warden's wife, who lived three floors down, would be prepared to do so. Even if she were not, nothing could shake Sawrey's determination to make his headquarters here up to the boy's execution; until then, at least, Fell's wife was certain to remain in prison.

She was really a quite remarkable woman, and would be the very devil to ensnare. Never before had he been challenged by a

quarry of such intelligence and elusiveness. It would be a contest of wits; these austere rooms with their atmosphere of grim seclusion were better suited to the occasion than the noisy inn, where it was difficult to concentrate. And as a base of operations he could not wish for anything better; he would be on the spot, instantly available, yet enjoy total privacy.

That night it occurred to him that he was about to engage in what might well be the most crucial and dangerous hunt of his career. He had not expected the Fell woman to put herself so completely in his hands. He had tried to keep her away from those children, piqued by Fell's high-handed decision to allow his wife access to the dungeons without first consulting him, the acting provost. Now it seemed as if, by an extraordinary stroke of luck, he had made exactly the right moves to put the woman at his mercy. Voluntarily incarcerated for at least the next month, she had put herself in a position where, with a minimum of inventiveness on his part, she would soon consider him her benefactor rather than her adversary. It was a situation not unlike that of John McHair.

That night, as he paced his dark, triangular room, the poacher was very much in his thoughts. Trying to map out his strategy for the coming month, he found himself referring back time and again to things the rogue had told him. At the time he had not paid much heed to the substance of the endless monologues about hares and does and rabbits, runways and territory and routine; now he tried to recall the exact words with which the man had tried to convey to him the secrets of his trade.

What he clearly remembered was the first condition for the capture of game: the hunter should begin by identifying himself with his quarry. He should observe it, familiarise himself with its habits, absorb its character before making a move. It had come as a surprise to him to hear how conventional animals were, how settled in their daily routine. There was a remarkable similarity between the world of the woods as depicted by John McHair and prison. Both had the same routine, the same narrow range of interest: bodily comfort, food, sleep, power over others. Prison was like his own park; he himself, like John McHair, king of the woods.

Towards morning, as the sun rose over the hills and he stood looking at the distant bay, he formulated concisely the objective of the manhunt: to prove, with documented evidence, that the Fell woman was a subversive Quaker. Yet he knew, without being

able to put his finger on it, that there was more in his determination to ensnare her. A cold passion seemed to have taken hold of him. Had it to do with his faith? As a devout Independent, he regarded Quakers as abominations. What was more, now that they had been officially classified as dangerous by the proclamation, it was his duty to hunt them down and bring them to justice. But this did not explain his excitement, the nervous alertness of all his faculties tonight. Watching the sun rise over the city, he concluded that what drove him was the passion of the hunt itself. That presented a danger. If he wanted to trap his exotic prey, he must keep a cool head, a sharp eye, be aware of his own shortcomings and plan his campaign accordingly. What he needed, before making the next move, was a cold-blooded look at John Sawrey and his foibles, especially his sense of inferiority. But he should also identify himself with her, beginning with Quaker thought, principles, aspirations. He would visit the few at present in prison; he would pick their brains, absorb their souls. She should not know of this, but that was easy. Quakers were now kept in solitary confinement, in chains, without visitors. Finally, he should make her incriminate herself. To encourage her to talk was not enough; even if she were to admit to the most heinous of crimes, it would be worthless without a written confession or a verbatim report duly validated by sworn witnesses. He should have a court recorder write down every word, once she started to tell all. The man must, of course, remain out of sight. But where to find someone able to perform such a delicate and confidential task, and with accuracy? Offhand, he could think of only one man: old Holofernes Stowe, scribe of the Assizes. Most intelligent and accurate; he used an abbreviated script that only he could read. But he lived in Kendal; it would either need a handsome reward or some kind of blackmail. The latter was the most dependable, but what dark secrets could an academic old bachelor like Holly Stowe be hiding? Well, if there were any skeletons in his closet, the constable would find them.

He watched the feathery night clouds catch fire in the sunrise. What patience he would need! What insight into the mind of that extraordinary woman! Could he possibly understand her? How would she feel, for example, when, this very morning, fresh, crisp, fragrant straw was spread in her cell, bringing a scent of summer, of freedom, of home?

* * *

Ann Traylor returned to the prison in a mood of contrition, wondering how she would find Margaret Fell after what must have been a gruesome night. She herself had slept only fitfully, haunted by dreams of rats, screaming madwomen, pitch darkness, prowling men in cloaks and black hats. Several times she had found herself sitting bolt upright, heart pounding, overcome by a terrible sense of guilt. At one moment she had even considered dressing and going to join her, but one look through the window at the black mass of Lancaster Castle among the stars had sent her, shivering, back to bed.

She hesitated in the gateway, afraid to go in; then, disgusted with herself, she marched into the warden's office. Mr. Farragut welcomed her with the usual mocking smile. 'Well, well, young lady! We're in a hurry this morning, aren't we?'

She scarcely heard him; she imagined Margaret Fell crouching in that filthy straw, terrified, her eyes demented from the horrors of the night. As she descended with the jailer carrying the lantern, the stench of the dungeons seemed worse than ever. But there were no yells or whistles from the black mouths of the passages; she ran past the cage of the lunatics, ducking away from the claws reaching between the bars; at the door to the children's dungeon she cried, even before the man with the lantern had caught up with her, 'Margaret Fell? Margaret Fell! Canst thou hear me?'

'Good morning, Ann. The voice was cheerful. When the lantern lit up the inside of the cage, there she was, tall and dignified, wading towards the door to unlock it. 'Hast thou brought some candles? I'm afraid we used them all.'

'Oh — candles — yes, yes, certainly . . .' She rummaged nervously in her basket and produced one of the candles she had packed that morning.

'Splendid. May I light it from your lantern, my good man?'

'Yes, ma'am.' The jailer opened the little glass door to enable her to light the wick from the flame.

'Thank you very much. Good day to you.'

'Anything else, ma'am?'

'No, thank you. I'll arrange it with Miss Traylor, here.'

'Very good, ma'am. 'Bye, miss.' The lantern drew away.

There she stood, holding the candle, smiling. 'Come in, my dear.'

Ann watched her put the candle in the bottle. 'Don't you want to lock up again?'

'No, for thou wilt be going out again in a minute. There are a few things I want thee to get for me. Then I would like thee to go to the warden to arrange for this straw to be removed and fresh brought in. Tell him Justice Sawrey approved it, and that I'll pay for it, if necessary. Perhaps thou hadst better ask Mistress Fraley and offer her garnish for it.'

'Mistress Fraley?'

'Oh, of course, thou hast not met her yet. She is the housekeeper, or whatever it is called. She brings around the food, and grants privileges for money. Have a message taken to her by one of the turnkeys. I want the straw out of here this morning. Then I want the following things — here, a slate, write them down. It's quite a list.' She looked as though she were facing her kitchen staff at home, as imperious as ever. Not a hair out of place, completely at ease, with a peremptory disregard for her surroundings and, for that matter, the delicate mood of her companion.

As Ann dutifully wrote down the list, she was so full of resentment that she had to bite back the tears. She could not wait to get back into the fresh air, away from this impossible woman, free to think.

'Or whatever else the apothecary recommends for the mange. Hast thou got that?'

'Yes.'

'I also want some medication for Henry's eye.'

'Henry?'

'The boy.'

'Oh — oh, yes.'

'A salve or an ointment for the empty socket, and an eye patch.'

The night seemed to have widened the gulf that separated them. It gave Ann a feeling of loneliness; she had trouble not snapping back at all those ridiculous orders. Blankets, clothes, broom, bucket, bread, sausage, cheese, apples, combs, brushes, hunting water, cough lozenges, lavender — she would need a pushcart! But she did not protest; an argument would only keep her down here longer. At a given moment, waiting for Margaret Fell to think of one more item to add to the cartload, she glanced at the one-eyed boy leaning against the wall and saw him sneer at her. Suddenly she found herself thinking, 'He deserves to be hanged, the little ghoul!'

The thought pursued her when at last she found herself outside in the sunlit square. What had become of the noble feelings,

the sense of godliness, the yearning to serve the helpless? All that was left was anger and envy. Yes, envy: Margaret Fell had had an experience that she had not shared. But this was ridiculous! She could not go on being tied to Margaret Fell's apron strings! She was a woman herself now. She must begin to lead her own life. Then she realised what she was staring at, unseeingly: a hat in a milliner's shopwindow, an extravagant hat, wide-brimmed, green velvet, decorated with an audacious plume of pheasant feathers. Something about the hat, something daring, devil-may-care, seemed to personify the Ann of her daydreams, the ravishing beauty, woman of the world, pampered, contemptuous. Before she knew it, she found herself inside the shop, trying it on in front of the looking glass.

The buxom woman who served her, wreathed in smiles, observed her with shrewd little eyes. 'It's the very latest London fashion, miss. We just this morning finished making it up. You are the first to try it.'

Seen in the mirror, the ridiculous thing looked even more gaudy and extravagant than it had in the window. Yet something about it, something brazen, taunting . . . 'How much is it?'

'Five shillings, miss. Very, very reasonable, considering the amount of work. Do you realise how many delicate little feathers . . .' She looked in the mirror over her client's shoulder. 'Absolutely delicious! It looks *adorable* on you, miss. It sets off your beautiful complexion.'

Ann was about to say, 'It's not for me, it's for my mistress.' Then the thought, "There thou goest: hurrying back into servitude." She set her jaw and said briskly, 'All right, I'll take it.'

'Very good, miss. You will not regret it. It's most becoming. I'll get a box for it.'

'No, thank you. I'll wear it.'

'Ah?' The woman was obviously dying to find out more about her. She asked, with pursed-lipped unctuousness, 'Where shall I send the bill, miss?'

'No need for a bill. I'll pay for it now.' She rummaged in her basket for her purse.

It was ridiculous! She was out of her mind! One whole month's wages! She counted out the coins on the counter, all the while feeling that the next moment she would wake up. This could not be true, squandering her hard-earned money on this ridiculous . . . She dropped a coin. As she bent down to pick it up, the hat toppled and fell to the ground. It seemed an omen.

'Oh, miss, you *do* need pins with this hat!' The woman was leaning over the counter to look; as Ann straightened up, she caught a whiff of orange blossom from her ample cleavage.

'No, I thank you. It'll do nicely.' She wanted to get out, away from those beady little eyes fascinated by her servant's dress. A moment later she was back in the street.

The topheavy feeling of the wobbly thing on her head almost made her turn around to tell the woman she had changed her mind. But as she stood in hesitation, a young gentleman passed her, looked at her and doffed his hat. She had no idea who it was, he was a total stranger; then she caught sight of her reflection in the shopwindow. It was vague, but she saw in the little panel a fascinating vision of fashion and femininity, of sunlight glinting on golden pheasant feathers. Should she go back and get hatpins? But she had the feeling that the fat woman was watching, beady-eyed. The apothecary was just a few houses down; she would go there first.

She opened the door with a brisk tinkling of a little bell. The dusk inside was heavy with the scent of smelling salts and Peruvian balsam. She entered and stood nervously drumming her fingers on the counter, waiting for the apothecary with a new qualm of doubt and remorse. The walls were lined with jars; in a glass basin on the counter, slow, sluggish leeches were squirming. 'Anybody home?' she called.

There was a rustle and a clatter in the back of the shop; a mousy little man in a white smock emerged with the double glint of a pair of spectacles on the tip of his nose. 'Good morning, good morning, forgive me, ma'am, I did not hear you. What may we do for you today, ma'am?' He sang with servility; she had never been addressed so humbly in her life. She regained her composure.

'Let me see . . .' She produced the slate from her basket and studied it. 'To start with, I need some hunting water.'

'I beg your pardon?'

She gave him a withering look. 'Hunting water, for lice. Surely you have that, haven't you?'

'Oh. Oh — yes, certainly, ma'am.' He scurried away to rummage among bottles in a cupboard. 'Here you are, ma'am. Will two pints be sufficient?'

'Ridiculous. That bottle doesn't contain two pints! I need at least — I don't know. You tell me. Six lice-infested children; how much would one need?'

'Six?' The little man's mouth fell open.

'Indeed, six.'

'Very good, ma'am.' He scurred again; a moment later he put a larger bottle on the counter. 'That should be sufficient, ma'am.'

'Very well.'

'Anything else?'

'Certainly. I need something for the mange.'

'Mange?'

She looked down on him haughtily. 'I also need some ointment for the inflamed socket of a child's missing eye.'

'Missing eye . . .'

'I suppose I'll also need an eye patch. Won't I?'

The little man now gazed at her with bafflement. 'How — how did that happen, ma'am?'

'Did what happen?'

'The eye . . . an accident?'

'No, no,' she said, aloof. 'Someone gouged it out. Let me see . . . I also need lavender, cough lozenges . . .'

'Gouged it out?! For mercy's sake, why?!'

She would have loved to reply, 'Because he brained his papa with a poker,' but thought better of it. 'Oh, just one of those family tiffs,' she said. 'Is there a special ointment you would recommend?'

The apothecary, numbed, went through the motions with staring eyes. It was a long list and it took a long time; what it achieved was that when she left the shop, after telling him to send the bill to Mistress Fell at the Three Swans, she no longer felt as if she were masquerading. The hat, for better or for worse, had become hers.

The feeling of independence it gave her was such that she decided to take the medicine straight to the prison and to arrange for someone from the inn to accompany her to carry the rest. Decked out as she was now, she could not march through town carrying a broom and a bucket. Of course, her simple gown suddenly looked drab, the hat was like a flag on a peat barge. But she was so self-confident now that reality caught up with her only as she approached the prison. In the gateway, the wobbly thing on her head became ludicrous again. Impossible to descend into the dungeons like this! She must have been insane! Again she considered going back to the milliner's and telling the woman she had reconsidered. Maybe she could say that her husband . . . No!

She would not knuckle under to Margaret Fell again! The hat was *hers*, and she was going to keep it. All right, she could not wear it going down; but what would she do with it? Hang it on the prison gate? She and her crazy, impulsive actions! What in the world was she going to do with it? She would have to leave it in the warden's office. The warden had a bit of a leer, but at least he would not gossip about it. Or would he?

When she opened the door to the office, her heart stopped. There, in front of the warden's desk, stood Judge Thomas Fell.

Her impulse was to flee; but it was too late. Blushing, she made a deep curtsy, mumbled, 'Good mo—' There went the hat, crashing to the floor.

She was so mortified that she could not pick it up. She rose, eyes closed, wanting to be dead.

'Allow me.'

She opened her eyes. There was the judge, his face noncomittal, proffering the hat.

'Thank you, sir . . .'

'Are you going down to see Mistress Fell?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Pray ask her if there is anything she would wish me to do. Tell her I am at her disposal.'

Very well, sir.'

'Come back to let me know, will you, please?'

She turned around and made a dash for the door. She dropped the hat on the chair by the door and slipped out.

The turnkey escorted her down. For the second time that morning she descended the endless steps. She was furious with herself and mortified beyond words. It was all Margaret Fell's fault; it was she who had driven her to buy that hat! She knew she was being unreasonable, but she had spent a horrible night agonising about that woman and about the way she would find her after a night in a place like this, and then she had not even had a hair out of place.

When she arrived in front of the cell, there was Margaret Fell, barefoot, her skirts hitched up, scrubbing the cobbles with a broom. The straw was gone, the children were hopping and leaping around her in obscure high spirits; the one-eyed boy squatted moodily in a corner.

'Ah, there thou art!' Margaret Fell put the broom against the bars and brushed her hair out of her eyes with the back of

her hand. 'Hast thou bought the broom and the bucket yet?'

'No, I thought I would first bring the medicine.'

'Excellent! Don't buy them, I have borrowed a broom from Mistress Fraley; she lent me a bucket too. But I will need the chamber pot. Come in.'

She opened the gate, which was not locked; the children squealed with glee, playing scotchhoppers. But not even children at play could dispel the evil gloom of the dungeons. 'Let me see what thou hast got there. Is this the hunting water?'

'Yes. But I must tell you that your husband is upstairs.'

'Thomas? What brought him here?' Her alarm was, for some reason, gratifying.

'I don't know. He just asked me to tell you that he is at your disposal. He wants me to go back and tell him whether there is anything you might wish him to do. Would you like to see him?' It was a gratuitous remark; the judge had not suggested anything of the kind. She watched Margaret Fell's discomfiture with satisfaction.

'Oh? No . . . I — tell him I'll send him a letter. He should not come down here — not now, not until I have sorted this out.'

'So what shall I say? That there is nothing he can do for you?'

'Not for the moment. But maybe he will help thee carry the rest of the things. I forgot, of course, that all this has to be paid for. Ask him to take care of it.'

'I had the bill sent to the inn.'

'I see. Very good. Well, work it out with him. Careful, Jody! Don't upset the bucket!' She went to the little girl spinning madly on the hard, bare floor, took her by the arm, pointed at the bucket and made an admonishing gesture with her finger. Then she came back to the bars to pick up the broom again. 'All right, Ann, come back as soon as thou hast the rest. I need thee here.'

'Very well.' There was nothing else to say. She could not stand and watch Margaret Fell scrubbing like a scullery maid. 'Let's go,' she said to the jailer, who stared into the cell, open-mouthed, and followed him down the corridor. The lunatic woman seemed to have finally given up reaching for her through the bars. Their vague shapes sat huddled in a corner of the dark cell, nobody shrieked or banged chains.

On her way up, she braced herself to face the judge once more. Devil take that hat! What in the world had got into her? She would have liked to slip out into the square, leaving both the hat

and the judge behind; but after a brief hesitation in front of the door to the warden's office, she entered, her head held high.

Judge Fell was sitting in front of the warden's desk. He rose courteously; Mr. Farragut, somewhat surprised, followed suit. The judge turned to the warden. 'I'll be back to discuss this further. For the time being, I would be grateful if you would give mistress Fraley my respects and thank her for her kindness. Tell her I'll want to see her personally later today.'

'Very good, Your Lordship.'

The judge came towards Ann. This time she did not curtsy. He went to the door, opened it for her, then picked up her hat from the chair. 'Here you are.'

'Thank you.' She decided she would just carry it; but when they walked out of the dark gateway into the sunlit square, she put it on. 'Sir, your wife said —'

He put his hand on her arm. 'Not here!' His voice was hushed. 'There are a host of things I wish to know. Would you give me the pleasure of having luncheon with you?'

She stopped still with amazement. 'Lu-luncheon?' she stammered foolishly.

Forgive me, I sent Will Hartford and the coach back to the inn. Would you mind? It's only a short walk.'

'I — I'll be happy to . . .'

'Very well, then. This way —'

They set out across the sunlit square; as they passed through the shade of the statue of St. George, a swarm of starlings that had alighted on it took off again and swept like a cloud around the square, shifting from black to silver as they banked. There was about their sweep a wild, restless urgency; it was that time of year.

* * *

'I must confess something to you . . .' The girl looked young and charming in her nervous solemnity.

Until that moment Thomas Fell had sat in the crowded taproom steeped in gloom, carrying on little more than a desultory conversation. The fact that all Margaret had been able to think of for him to do was to help carry a maid's purchases rankled; now he became aware of this charming young person with her impossible hat, about to make a solemn confession after only one glass of claret.

'Ah? What mischief have you been up to?'

Her eyes, green and grave, looked up at him, twinkling with the reflection of the candle flame. 'Mischief? I don't understand,' she said, taking herself seriously indeed. 'What I meant was — I don't really understand your wife.'

He smiled. 'Well,' he said lightly, 'you are not the only one, my dear. There are times when I don't understand her myself. More wine?'

While he filled her glass, she stared at him with astonishment from underneath her hat.

'Don't look so surprised,' he said. 'Believe me, you are not the only one to be mystified by Mistress Fell on occasion. You should have seen the face of that old harridan Fraley when she was told to take a bucket and broom to the wife of the Lord Chief Justice in the children's cell. She looked as if she had seen a ghost, until I crossed her palm with silver. After that, of course, everything fell into place: a rich lady's whim indulged good-naturedly by her husband.' He spoke more bitterly than he intended.

'Well . . . isn't that so?' The girl must have realised that she had gone too far, for she blushed. It was a ravishing blush; she actually was quite a ravishing little creature. He had never noticed it before at home she had just been one of the nondescript young females with whom his wife surrounded herself, coming and going like pigeons, continually different, always the same. 'The concept is somewhat simplistic,' he said, smiling to put her at her ease. 'I would have thought you to be one of the first to recognise this. Aren't you a Quaker yourself?'

She stared at her glass, frowning. 'I was. Or, at least, I thought I was. But then . . .'

'Then what?'

She glanced at him, clearly of two minds whether to confide in him or mind her place. For a young woman who was, in effect, a servant, it must be difficult to seem poised and at the same time show deference to her master. Who was she, anyway? He remembered something about an alcoholic father, distant relation of the Rutledges. Yes, that was it: the women had arranged for her employment at the Hall through the intricate network of ladies-of-the-manor that reached from Land's End to John O'Groats. It must be one of the largest and most effective grapevines in the world.

She sipped her wine. 'I was sceptical in the beginning, when George Fox first arrived.' She had obviously decided to unburden herself. 'I thought he was, frankly, a mountebank, and

the way he proceeded to make your wife suffer made me more and more — ' She stopped, and there was that blush again. She averted her eyes and looked accusingly at her glass.

'Pray proceed. I'm fascinated.'

'But — I don't think I . . .' Her eyes were shy and wary like a doe's.

He suddenly felt himself relax; the hurt, the apprehension that had haunted him ever since his wife returned from Windermere suddenly seemed to lift. Maybe it was the wine; they served a deuced good claret in this place. 'Look, dear child,' he said genially, 'don't go on blaming yourself for every honest word you say. I have been married to my good wife for over twenty years, and happily so; I must know her better by now than anyone else. The better one gets to know her, the more one loves her; and implicit in love is trust. So, trust her motives, trust her intuition, admire her courage and reserve judgment on her actions, even though occasionally they may appear — well — Dantesque.' He was startled by his sudden ebullience, it was unlike him. For some reason, he had felt compelled to sing his wife's praises. All resentment seemed dispelled; he was overwhelmed by a humorous tenderness for dear, impulsive Maggie. 'So, anything you can tell me about her present activity will give me a clearer notion of how to intervene, should the need arise. Which, between you and me, may be anytime.'

'Oh?' She looked worried.

'Never mind; pray continue. How did you feel about George Fox when you realised that he made my wife suffer?'

She stared at her glass again, touching its stem with a slender hand. 'He made all of us suffer, by first getting all of us excited and then abandoning us, just like that.'

'At that time, I gather, you still felt you understood my wife?'

She looked up, startled, but her aplomb was admirable. Apart from being good-looking, she had her wits about her. 'Rather. It was she who pulled us together by saying that there must be many others like us who had been abandoned by him, and that instead of feeling despondent we should come to their aid, especially those in prison . . . but you know all that.'

'Go on.'

'Well, I became her — her assistant. I admired her very much. I still do. Very much.' She looked at him earnestly.

'Then what happened?'

'Well, then you took us on that visit to Lancaster Castle and showed us . . . Why did you do that?'

'What?'

'Show us those hanged children.'

'To impress upon my wife and yourself what you were risking by your involvement with the Quakers. You know, I presume, that to be a Quaker is now a punishable offence.' He took a sip of wine. 'Well — it seems that my treatment has been effective in your case but not in hers.'

She smiled uncertainly; then she said, with a sudden rush of emotion, 'But it's different for me. I *did* believe in our mission, until I was assaulted.'

'You were *what?*'

'Assaulted . . .' She said it bashfully, her eyes downcast.

'For God's sake! When did that happen? Where?'

'In the dungeons, the first day, on our way up. A man burst out of a passage and — ' She stopped.

'What happened? Surely somebody came to your aid?'

'Your wife did. She beat on him with her basket until he gave up.'

'My God! Did you tell the warden?'

'Of course. The warden had warned us that this might happen.'

'But nothing did happen, did it? I mean — nothing serious?'

'No, nothing serious.' She reddened and looked away.

He suddenly felt embarrassed. He spotted a servingwench in the dusk of candlelight and tobacco smoke, and called for more duck. When he had been given a generous helping, he raised his glass and said, 'Well, here's to your continued good fortune.'

'Thank you.'

She herself did not drink. She had more sense than he had thought.

'So, after that incident you felt a cooling of your missionary zeal?'

'Yes, I suppose you could say that. More precisely, a resentment against your wife. I hope you don't mind my saying this,' she added hastily. 'I must assure you that I love her very much. I have an intense admiration for her; I am sure it's all a matter of my own feelings — '

'Don't apologise. She defended you, didn't she?'

'Yes, she did. But — well, you see, that night I was very distressed, and she was very kind to me, kinder than she had ever

been; I suddenly had a feeling, well ... My mother died very young, I never really had a mother. That night I had.'

'I see.'

'When the next morning she told me we were going back down there, I — I felt hurt. Stupidly, I'm sure, but terribly hurt. Oh, well ...'

How like Margaret! No wonder the poor child had doubted the sincerity of her motherly tenderness! 'You see, my dear, once my wife and, I suppose, most determined people have a goal in mind, they pursue it with a single-mindedness that often hurts others. They mean no harm — as a matter of fact, we should admire their incorruptibility. For that's what it is. She has a very clear concept of values. Once she has decided to help unfortunate children in a dungeon, that is her supreme concern. She cannot be frightened away, or dissuaded, or sidetracked, not even by the distress of someone she loves. She is a remarkable woman, you know. You have much to learn from her, perhaps we all have.'

She looked at him with an odd expression; then she said, 'I think she is lucky to have a husband like you.'

He stared at her for a moment. Was she more experienced than he thought? But her eyes were guileless, their innocence enhanced by that improbable hat. No experienced woman would have decked herself out with such a monument of *courtisanerie*. He had asked this harmless little wench to luncheon out of sheer, miserable loneliness, so as not to have to suffer through yet another meal all by himself in a corner of this raucous, reverberating den of jollity; now it turned out to have been an excellent idea. What if he invited her to supper too, after they had done their shopping for the empress in the dungeon? It might give rise to gossip; the place was full of people who knew him. A private room? He had to think of the child's reputation. But if he wanted to watch over his wife, he should know what was going on down there. He needed a spy.

'Well, we had better go and get the things she needs,' he said, putting down his napkin. 'Oh, forgive me, you have not finished your wine.'

She smiled. 'I have already had more than I should. This has been wonderful.'

'Well, it's mutual, I assure you. By the way, we have only scratched the surface of all this. Would it be imposing on you to ask you to join me for supper tonight?'

* * *

Ann felt a momentary misgiving. Was this right? Should she? But his eyes were so sincere, his aristocratic gentility so evident that she brushed aside her timorous qualms. 'I'll be happy to.'

'Good. But there is one thing I must mention — I hope it will not offend you.'

She felt a return of her apprehension. 'Why?'

'People have the unfortunate disposition to suspect the worst in their fellow men. The only way to prevent tongues from wagging would be for us to sup in a private room. Normally, this would be a fairly intimate thing to do — I hope I need not assure you that my intentions are entirely honourable.'

'Of course.'

'I must remain fully informed about what goes on in the prison. If it would be agreeable to you, I would say: for the next few days at least, let us meet for supper. Would that be all right?'

She nodded.

'Well then, shall we go?' He rose, holding out his hand to her. Without the wobbly hat she could have accepted his assistance with smiling grace; now it was a rather hazardous operation, as if she were balancing a pitcher on her head. He did not seem to be aware of it; she felt grateful to him. From the moment he had helped her in the warden's office, he had guided her with the discreet expertness of a dancing partner.

Considering the circumstances, their shopping expedition was surprisingly lighthearted. By the time they arrived at the chamber pot on her list, they felt sufficiently at ease with one another to indulge in a rather juvenile private joke at the tinker's as they chose the largest copper vessel available. The man's obvious bewilderment while wrapping up the resonant thing sent her into almost irrepressible laughter. The judge had no trouble keeping his face straight until they emerged from the dark little shop; then he took her arm in a boyish eruption of pent-up hilarity. As they crossed the square on their way back to the castle, they again startled the starlings befouling St. George's headless shoulders; the swarm took off with a mighty rush of wind and swept around and around the keep, shifting colour. In the warden's office, Mr. Farragut was about to hand over the keys to the hunchback Hathaway, the guardian of the night. The judge announced that some purchases would be delivered during the course of the evening, all of them intended for Mistress Fell, and he requested Mr. Hathaway to see that they were delivered to

her. Then, without further ado, he invited Ann to leave with him.

It troubled her; she felt she should have gone down, to tell Margaret Fell that the things she wanted were on their way. He must have sensed her discomfort, for when they were out in the square again he said, 'You must have wondered why I prevented you from going down.'

'Indeed.'

'I intend to go myself, tonight.'

'I see.'

'I expect you would like to change before supper. May I escort you back to your inn?'

'Yes, please.'

'If you wish, I'll wait for you there. You won't be long?'

'Oh, no — not more than a few minutes.'

What ridiculous pretence! She had nothing to change into. But after they arrived at the inn she went upstairs, let herself into her rooms and burst into giggles, leaning against the door. Well, she had better change into her travelling smock, the only other garment she possessed. She spent some time freshening up and ended by posturing in front of the mirror, trying on her hat at various angles, with various facial expressions. It was her first chance that day to study it properly; perhaps it was rather gaudy and pretentious, but, whatever else it might be, it was obviously effective. Fancy, Judge Fell taking her to supper!

She found him waiting by the side of a sedan chair; obviously, he had not cared to let Will Hartford in on their tryst. It added more spice to the already exciting occasion; it was amazing how safe and at ease she felt in his presence.

It was the first time in her life that she had been carried in a chair. He assisted her as she climbed into the small, dark cubicle; she sat down on the cushioned seat and he closed the door from the outside. She nearly cried out when the men lifted the thing, but when they started to walk, with practised, steady gait, and Thomas Fell smiled at her through the little open window as he walked alongside, she reclined in the cushions and relished the faint, luxurious smell of stale perfume and musty velvet. Well, here she went: Ann Traylor in a chair! Ever since she was a child it had seemed the height of luxury to her, unattainable, another world. She had run alongside chaises with other urchins, jeering, to the fury of the linkmen who walked ahead; never had she expected to be carried like this herself one day: softly swaying,

reclining in the cushions, with a Lord Chief Justice walking alongside.

It was a delightful evening. Never before had she talked so openly on such intimate matters to anyone, not even Margaret Fell. After the second glass of wine she told him about her childhood, her sad father, the harshness of poverty, the degradation of servitude; she even told him of her sudden awareness the other day of the bitterness of life and her determination to grasp every chance to enjoy beauty and comfort and joy. Their surroundings enhanced the intimacy of the evening — dark red hangings, a crystal candelabrum with seven candles, their flames reflected by silver cutlery, gleaming pewter, goblets of wine. It seemed as if during those few hours she blossomed into that different person, the woman of her daydreams. When at last he rose to take her back to the inn, she was tempted to take a memento of the evening, but for a lady of the world to walk off with a piece of cutlery would be incongruous.

He took his leave in the gateway at the inn. He kissed her hand, thanked her for a delightful evening and suggested he return the next day at the same hour, to take her out to supper. She graciously accepted, swept up the stairs to her room as if trailing the train of a costly gown, and was met in the mirror by a dowdy female in a drab travelling smock, with on her head a hat that looked like a pheasant on a dish, carried in for a banquet. She took it off and felt like tossing it into a corner, but she stroked it, murmured, 'Good beastie' and laid it carefully on the dresser. She put the candle on the table and went to fetch the exercise book.

'Tonight, after a day of many unexpected happenings, I supped with Justice Fell in a private room . . .'

There was much to write, yet she suddenly felt prompted to put down the quill, go to the window, open the curtain and gaze at the sky.

'Ah! Life, life!' she thought, as the sweep of the Milky Way greeted her with all its glorious promise above the dark, brooding mass of Lancaster Castle. For the first time that night she thought of her mistress, incarcerated with those horrible children underneath that mountain of stone. A hundred feet deep.

For some reason, it spoiled the moment. She closed the window again, drew the curtain, picked up her quill and wrote, *'We have agreed to do so every day, for the time being, so I may keep him fully informed of what goes on in the prison. He is*

really most concerned about his wife. I told him she is lucky to have such a sensitive, loyal and loving husband to watch over her. And with such discretion! He is the most tactful man I ever met. There I sat, talking my head off virtually during the entire meal, but his attention never flagged, or if it did, he never showed it. The food . . .'

The quill scratched on, page after page, as she recaptured the evening minutely, remembering every detail, every word, every thought.

* * *

Thomas Fell looked forward to seeing his wife again. When he arrived at the castle, he was filled with good will and understanding. He greeted Hathaway jocularly, told him of his intention and said he would be back anon. The guard at the gate, who lifted his lantern and saluted respectfully when he saw who it was, opened the door to let him in. He stepped inside and was assailed by the pestilential stench that rose from the well of the stairs; he hesitated and after a few seconds turned around. He mumbled something to the guard, went to hand in his lantern at the warden's office and left on the pretext that he had forgotten something.

In the dark square, looking up at the sky ablaze with stars, he asked himself why, for God's sake, he had not gone down. Out of sheer revulsion from the obscene place? Not very noble, considering his wife was at the bottom of that pit. No, there was more to it; he tried to fathom it as he walked the dark streets to the inn. Had it been the incompatibility of the two worlds: the private dining-room and the dungeons? Had he been ashamed to confront his wife? Did he, despite the admiration he had expressed so volubly that day, hold her motives in contempt, and had he been afraid this would show when he confronted her?

When he arrived at the inn, he was too restless to go to bed. He turned around and walked back to the castle. In the warden's office he countered the hunchback's smirk with haughty authority. 'I'll be working in chambers all night, Hathaway,' he said, turning his back on the unsavoury creature. 'I would appreciate it if, towards dawn, one of your men could bring me a mug of ale.'

Legs scissoring in the lantern light, he strode down the long, empty corridor, up the flight of stairs to the judges' chambers.

The room was cold and desolate; its solitary window looked on to a blank wall, bleak and forbidding in the moonlight.

He sat down at his desk, solitary figure in the candlelight, and began to tackle the pile of petitions that had accumulated during his absence.

Only after he had sat scribbling patiently for several hours, the shadow of his quill reaching out into the night, did the true reason for his retreat from the dungeons occur to him. By then the sense of well-being of the ageing *bon vivant* had been replaced by the unemotional realism of the judge. He knew now that, had he confronted his wife, he would have been aghast at the conditions under which she lived and would have been tempted to secure preferential treatment for her. That would have been wrong. She was playing with her life; Cromwell's proclamation was only the beginning of a systematic persecution of the Quakers. She must be prevailed upon to give up and return to Swarthmoor or she would end as a prisoner herself. He should see to it that she was discouraged, that things were made as harsh as possible for her, that she felt deserted, even though he would be watching over her day and night, unseen.

He sat there writing until the dawn paled the light of the candle and the wall opposite the window turned blue with the daybreak. A clatter of wheels echoed in the courtyard as Mistress Fraley pushed her cart to the well of the stairs; he heard the squealing of pulleys as the cart was lowered to the first level, where the debtors and their families rotted. He pushed back his chair and walked to the window to see the ramparts touched by the sunrise. As the first sunlight flashed on the weathervane on the northeast tower, he thought of the young girl now awakening in a small room in the city. She would stretch and yawn, swing her legs out of bed; then she would pull her nightgown over her head.

He turned away, gathered up his papers, locked them in the armoire and pocketed the key. He had better break his fast before he met Ann Traylor at the gate so she could tell his wife — what? There was nothing to tell, now that he had decided to make things as harsh as possible for her. Well, he might go to meet her all the same.

Outside in the square, untouched as yet by the sun, the starlings sat huddled close together on the shoulders of St. George, beheaded by the Ironsides. If that had been all they had done! In their fury against all popery and pagan contamination they had

smashed the statues in every church, even the organs, thus not only smashing the face of idolatry but cutting out its tongue as well.

Ah, the folly of men! For some reason, the thought of the smashed organs caused a feeling of resentment towards Margaret and her suicidal folly. Unless he managed to save her, she might never again be able to teach her daughters a madrigal like 'The Andalusian Merchant'. Humming it sombrely, he walked to his tryst.

* * *

On her second night in the children's dungeon, after a day of Herculean labour, Margaret Fell surveyed with satisfaction the sparkling-clean cell filled with fragrant straw. The children still looked scruffy, but she had doused their heads with hunting water. She gathered them around her and inspected their scalps; she could find no more lice. All of them were very affectionate now except Henry, who persisted in his morbid hostility and even refused the ointment and the eye patch. But she did not let him trouble her; she felt triumphant. She stretched out on the fragrant straw and, exhausted by the unaccustomed labour, dropped off to sleep.

Half an hour later she awoke with a start, to find the children scratching in their sleep. She lit the candle and discovered to her horror that they were crawling with sinister-looking bugs of a reddish-brown colour, larger than the ticks that plagued the hounds in the fall. The sight filled her with revulsion.

Cleaning out the dungeon had not been enough; the children obviously carried the bugs in their clothes and on their bodies. On the morrow she would bathe them, cut their hair, put them all in clean clothes; it would mean another day of hard work, but she must not be lax now or all her labours would come to naught. Even if she had to dip them over and over until they screamed, she should not allow the bugs to infest her straw, so fresh and inviting, spiced with lavender, which gave it a hint of the fells in summer.

She settled down to sleep again, but found she could not come to rest. She felt itchy all over and began to scratch herself as fiercely as the children, even though she was sure her itching was just imagination. A tearful panic was getting hold of her when suddenly a light came down the passage. It had to be Thomas, it

just had to be; she was at the bars in a flash, peering out, breathless with anticipation.

It turned out to be John Sawrey. Her disappointment was so acute that she could barely muster the courtesy to return his greeting as he appeared, cloaked and plumed, at the gate, carrying, of all things, a seat-stick. She detested the sight of him, which was unreasonable, considering she owed the fresh straw to him, if nothing else. When he said with a bow and a sweep, 'Good evening, Mistress Fell, how have you been today?' she managed to hitch up a smile and answer, 'Thank you, Mr. Sawrey, very well indeed, owing to your kind assistance.'

'I am happy to hear that. Is there anything else you wish me to do for you?'

'No, I thank you. Not for the moment.' The bugs seemed too intimate a subject to mention; she had trouble not to scratch herself while he was watching.

'In that case: your obedient servant, Madam.' He made another bow and sweep. 'Constable . . .' She realised he was not alone; obviously, he was too grand to carry his own lantern.

After he was gone, she sat watching the candle flame, with the children pressed around her like chicks in spite of the bugs. She realised she had been unfair; whatever Sawrey's ulterior motives might be, he was the only one who betrayed any interest in what she was doing. True, Thomas had sent word that he was 'standing by', or whatever his virile term had been for dallying in indecision; Ann was a useful little thing, she certainly could not do without her, but the girl's reluctance was so obvious that her presence had become a burden rather than a comfort. John Sawrey alone seemed to have some notion of the reality of the prison, the small day-to-day things that were so important: fresh straw, fresh water, cleanliness, light. Should she have invited him in, to show him the clean straw? Well, tomorrow she would really have something to show him when he came.

The moment Ann arrived in the morning, Margaret organised a thorough cleaning of all the children, with the exception of Henry, who snarled like a chained dog the moment he was approached. Mistress Fraley brought hot water, soap and a brush, surlily but promptly. While Ann put ready the fresh clothes she had bought the day before, Margaret herself, sleeves rolled up above her elbows, her skirt hitched around her waist, stood up one squalling, naked child after another in the wooden bucket and scrubbed them with the brush until their pallid, sickly skin

glowed. They hated it, but did not struggle; only the little girl Jody began to fight when soap got in her eyes, poor thing. The scene seemed to touch Mistress Fraley, for at a given moment, of her own accord, she brought a bucket of milk, which she proceeded to share out with a ladle among the naked children shivering in the straw, waiting to have their hair cut. Only when they were allowed to put on their new clothes did they become sprightly, especially little Jody, decked out in a gingham smock that was much too large for her but looked crisp and clean. The child was beside herself with delight and demonstrated it by standing on her head, emitting monotonous hoots of pure joy. The boys, bald, scrubbed little mannikins now their hair had been shorn, started to play leap-frog again; soon there was such infectious joy in the cavernous cage full of romping children that the three women were briefly united by a sense of tenderness and satisfaction. Ann said, 'Oh, I wish the judge could see them now!'

'Who? Sawrey?'

'No, your husband. He'd see quite a difference from yesterday.'

'Yesterday? He didn't see them yesterday.'

The girl looked at her, puzzled. 'I thought he came to visit you last night.'

'Why? Did he say he intended to do so?'

'Yes . . .' The girl suddenly seemed embarrassed, as if she were sorry she had mentioned it.

Supper came, and with it the strenuous efforts to prevail upon the famished children to wait their turn. They were so happy and good-humoured now, with the exception of Henry, that afterwards they sang 'The Andalusian Merchant' right through for the first time, without a single true note and each descant a discord, but with such zest that the mad biddies in the adjoining cell joined in, slamming their chains against the bars to beat the time. It was a cacophony that would have set a dog howling, yet Margaret sat beaming in the centre of her little choir, filled with gratitude.

Finally, she fell asleep in a happy glow, her adoptive young tightly pressed around her. Half an hour later she woke up at a fierce sting in the side of her neck. She slapped it, but the sting burned viciously and did not diminish; she felt the spot with her finger and discovered a hard, alien body that she plucked out of her skin with a cry of revulsion. She inspected it by the light of

the candle; it was one of those horrible bugs. She gazed aghast at the squirming insect she was holding between her fingertips, not knowing what to do with it; suddenly she heard a child's voice say, 'Burn it.'

She looked up and discovered that Henry had joined her. He squatted beside her, staring with his solitary eye at the squirming bug. 'Stick it in the flame,' he said. 'Look . . .' He put his hand inside his clothes, produced another of the ghastly creatures, which, to her horror, he proceeded to hold in the candle flame. There was a brief, repulsive hiss; he shot the charred little corpse into the darkness with finger and thumb and turned to her, a smug expression on his face. 'That's the way to do it,' he said. 'Try it. Come on, stick it in the flame.'

Squeamishly, she obeyed. At the horrible hiss, she burned the tips of her fingers, and her hand darted back.

'Now shoot it,' he said. 'Go on, shoot it.'

She did so with relief; only then did it penetrate to her that this was the first time he had ventured out of his corner. The difference between the snarling animal in the corner and this self-important little boy was deeply moving.

'Catch another,' he said. 'There are plenty of 'em. They are bedbugs. They hide in the wall and come out at night. So, better get used to them. Come, catch another.'

So wonderful was the sudden intimacy between them, so miraculous, that she found herself hoping she might find another of those bugs on her. She had no trouble doing so; feeling something move, she looked at her ankles and saw to her horror that her legs were swarming with the filthy creatures. She could go on burning them all night without making any difference; she looked about her and it seemed she saw them everywhere in the trembling candlelight. Her beautiful, clean, lavender-scented straw was alive with the vermin; so were her clean, freshly furbished children. But the fact that the bugs had caused Henry to come out of his corner made them seem a mere nuisance, not the plague they really were.

She did not engage him in conversation. Intuition told her to let him take the lead and venture as far out of his shell as he wished. They put a few more bugs to their fiery death; then suddenly he turned around and crawled back to his corner. But, brief though their conversation had been, the chasm had been bridged; he would come back in his own time.

After he was gone she sat gazing at the candle flame, watching

it grow tall and voracious towards the end of the wick until it twitched, sputtered and died. In the darkness she went into meeting for worship. 'God,' she thought, 'dear God, thank Thee. Now what do I do? Tell me what to do.' Her prayer was no longer directed at an all-powerful Father in an office in the sky, as George had put it. She knew now that there was a real, positive power within her, an inward Light that would rise to the surface and direct her thoughts, if she gave it the opportunity to do so. It was mysterious and yet, once the mystery had been accepted, utterly simple and real. This time again there rose within her a sense of direction. She had expected to be told how to identify herself with the little boy in the corner. But the Light guided her to think, 'Thou canst not identify with a boy of eleven, mutilated by an unimaginable, horrendous act of violence and about to be hanged. Think for thyself.' She proceeded to think for herself. 'If I were asked: What is thy dearest wish, what would my answer be?' Well, that was easy: to liberate the children, all children, from the nightmarish dungeons of England's prisons. 'No, no — think of thyself as a prisoner, plagued by bugs, pining for fresh air, wind, sunlight . . .' A walk in the sun, that was what she would really enjoy. Would he too? Of course he would! She should ask permission to take him out for a walk in the sun! She would ask Sawrey. Where was he, by the way? Wasn't he coming tonight? And where was Thomas?

It was obvious now that Thomas was not coming, in spite of what Ann had said about his intention to visit her. What had made the girl so self-conscious? Suddenly she found herself yearning for him so passionately that she realized he had been wise to stay away. He should not come, not yet; if she were to see him now, she would be tempted to surrender and leave with him. For underneath her sense of triumph and achievement were weakness and terror. She dare not think of next month. If she as much as touched on the knowledge that Henry . . . She could not stand it. It made her want to flee into Thomas' arms, hide her face, cover her ears.

No, she must go one step, one day, at a time. Walk in the sun. Take Henry out for a walk in the sun. Ask Sawrey.

She sat listening in the darkness, her head turned towards the gate, waiting for the light of his lantern.

* * *

When Mistress Fell sprang her request on him at dead of night,

John Sawrey was impressed. There she stood, already half a jailbird despite her comely gown and her hair, which still had a well-groomed sheen in the lantern light but was beginning to lose its shape. She must know herself that before long she would look like the rest of them: haggard, dishevelled, vermin-ridden, disfigured by scabs, a creature of the lightless depths; yet her eyes were radiant and she sounded excited as she said, 'Mr. Sawrey, there is something you can do for me! I should like to take Henry outside for a walk on the ramparts every day. Would this be possible, do you think?'

He tried not to show his confusion. What bothered him about the request was that it was unforeseen. In the contest in which they were engaged, victory would go to the one who managed to stay one move ahead of the other. He obviously needed to identify with her to a deeper level still. Where were those pamphlets about the Quakers he had ordered? Nobody in this town could be prevailed upon to move briskly, spring had turned even the heads of old billy-goats like Fell. He wondered whether she had an inkling that at this very moment her husband and her maid were supping together in a private room at the Red Lion. He hoped not; it might induce her to drop this mad venture and return to the world to reclaim her rights.

'I will certainly put it to the regents, Madam,' he said. 'Your concern for the boy is impressive, misguided though it may be.'

She peered at him intently through the bars; again he sensed that never before had he faced such intelligence and awareness. His own smiling dumpling of a wife was enough to make him burst into sardonic laughter, compared to this bright-eyed, quick-witted female lynx. 'Why the regents?' she asked. 'Can you not grant the permission yourself?'

'In this particular instance, I'm afraid not, Madam. The boy's late father was a man of influence.' That was true enough, but he suspected that she, with her experience of judicial affairs, would smell a rat. He must be careful, give himself time to think. 'Well,' he said, taking off his hat for the bow and sweep, 'I must bestir myself, Mistress Fell. I have to make the rounds before retiring.'

'I still do not understand why it is necessary for you to consult the regents,' she persisted. 'If you yourself feel that the boy should not be pampered by letting him smell the fresh air for five minutes a day, why not say so?'

He had to meet this challenge or she would brood about it during the lonely hours of the night. Uncharacteristically, he said at an impulse, 'To tell you the truth, Madam, I want to consider this thoughtfully. On the one hand I am eager to oblige you as the wife of a distinguished colleague, on the other I have the duty to be consistent in my application of the law.'

'Come, come, Mr. Sawrey,' she said with a hint of her husband's mannerism, 'surely, to permit a child an innocent walk on the walls cannot be interpreted as a judicial inconsistency!'

'I beg to differ, Madam. There is no more embarrassing sight than that of a judge who first sentences a criminal to death and then proceeds to coddle him to assuage his own uneasy conscience.'

'You have an uneasy conscience?' She asked it in apparent innocence, but could not hide the dagger in her question.

'Indeed not.' He smiled. 'I will be happy to explain to you why not, tomorrow. Now you must forgive me.' He made his bow and sweep. 'Good night, Madam. Remember, I am at your disposal at all times. Constable.' It was not necessary, she had registered the man's presence last night, but he must make certain she knew he was not alone, rather than have her discover this at an inappropriate moment later in the game.

'Good night, Mr. Sawrey. I thank you!' she called after him as he walked away; it expressed a radiant self-confidence.

Instead of going to the Quakers in the other corridor as he had planned, he climbed the interminable steps, to be waylaid in the gateway by little Hathaway, who called from the door of his office, 'Your Honour! Someone has arrived for you!'

It was old Holly Stowe, bundled up to the ears, his beak-nosed face pale with fatigue, a worn valise by his side. Someone had moved briskly after all; but at that moment Sawrey failed to appreciate the man's eagerness. After Holly had been guided to the pie-shaped room next to his own, the old chatterbox struck up a snattering conversation with the constable, who had been steeped in gloom, exiled on the top floor of the tower, forced to sleep during the day with no one to relieve his boredom except sparrows and spiders. They went on blabbing and blathering; the walls of the tower might be three feet thick, those that separated the rooms were made of paper. It boded ill for the future, but to tell them to hold their tongues would be unwise; no point antagonising them when he had to rely on their loyalty and discretion in the near future. He opened the door. 'I'll be in chambers in the

other wing, if I'm wanted,' he said, interrupting their gabble. Holly Stowe, sitting on the edge of the bed in his bare feet, his broken boots beside him, was showing a huge big toe, inflamed by gout, to the constable squatting in front of him; the candle stood between them on the floor.

Sawrey went to fetch the key to the chambers. 'No sign of Justice Fell?' he asked the warden as he took it from him.

'Not tonight, Your Honour,' the hunchback replied. 'At least, not yet. If he comes, shall I tell him you are expecting him?'

These infernal busybodies! 'No, thank you, Hathaway,' he replied coolly. 'Just tell him I have the key.'

'Very well, Your Honour. I expect he'll be back. There's a letter for him arrived tonight from London. I put it on his desk.'

He found the letter on the desk, as Hathaway had said; it had been sent by magistrate's coach, first priority, and bore the seal of the Palace of St. James's. He balanced it on his hand, looking at it thoughtfully. Fell was safely ensconced with his little doxy; he had at least an hour.

He prised the seal open expertly and unrolled the parchment; another letter fell out, in a different handwriting. He read the parchment first; it was signed 'Margaret Fell'. '*Dear Heart! As the father of thy people, I come to plead with thee for one of thy youngest children . . .*' Dear Heart? As he read on, he discovered that it was a petition to Oliver Cromwell, asking for a pardon for the boy Henry Jones. She was raving mad! Calling Cromwell 'Dear Heart', addressing him as 'thou'? What had got into the woman? He read the accompanying note. It was signed 'S'. '*Amice. I received the accompanying screed this morning and thought it judicious to refer it back to you prior to presenting it, as it appears to be written by your good wife. Under the circumstances, her appeal might have an adverse effect on C as its salutation, mode of address and valediction smack of Quakerism, presently one of C's bugbears. Should you so desire, however, I will be happy to present it on return. I trust your good family is well; here matters have changed considerably since you left, and I often think of your remote eyrie with envy; yours has been the better choice. When the fires of passion are raging, the wise eagle soars out of reach of the flames, content to ride the thermals. Be well. S.*' There was a postscript: '*The boy's victim had powerful friends in these parts, who would react adversely to a pardon, justified as it might appear considering the child's age and, no*

doubt, the nature of the provocation. The late lamented was notorious for his addiction to the sin of Tiberius.'

Who was 'S'? What was the sin of Tiberius? Whatever it was, the letter put a new aspect to the case. It meant the woman was more reckless than he had thought, and at the same time had friends in London powerful enough to intercept a letter to Cromwell. He could be bolder in his approach then he had been thus far, but he must be more thorough in documenting his case. His proof that she was a Quaker must be irrefutable. More than that, he must prove that her concern for the condemned boy was a direct result of her blasphemous persuasion, and that she intended to disrupt the due process of law. In order to present incriminating evidence that would stand up in court, he must provide an exact definition of Quakerism, based on expert testimony, by someone versed in legal terminology. The obvious answer was Dr. Marshall, spokesman for the ministers at the trial of George Fox.

After carefully restoring the seal to the letter, he wrote a note to the good doctor, asking him for a succinct, unequivocal summary of the heresies subscribed to by the people calling themselves 'Children of the Light' and also, as an afterthought, for the dossier on George Fox compiled for the Lancaster trial.

* * *

'So I said to him, quite frankly, "No, Oliver, this is as far as I can follow thee. Imprison him, although even that would seem excessive punishment for a man who, after all, is a monarch. But have him beheaded? No. That, to me, would turn thee into a tyrant." '

'What did he say to that?'

Thomas Fell looked at the girl's eager face, and realised that he had never told the story of his break with Cromwell more compellingly. For some reason, the thought distracted him. He took a sip of burgundy, gazed at the glass, dark red, candlelit, a summer rose. Ah! If only he were still the dashing young barrister, favourite of both the King and his executioner! But the young barrister would not have known how to savour this moment. Ripeness is all. 'I wonder whether Charles ever realised that by the manner in which he met his death he probably saved the monarchy, in the end. Despite his glaring faults, he was a wise, occasionally even a poetic man.'

'Ah?'

He realised that he had been talking too much. 'Sorry. Where was I?'

'You told him that the King's execution would turn him into a tyrant. How did he take that?'

'Oh, he turned around and walked away.' He had not; it had been a harrowing outburst of profane fury, Oliver at his worst. 'That was the last I saw of him. You must be tired, my dear,' he added unfairly.

'Oh, no, no! Quite the reverse!' She looked aghast, and no wonder: he had never seen anyone look less tired than she.

'More wine?' he asked.

She seemed about to refuse, but had second thoughts and nodded, struck, no doubt, by the thought that another glass of wine would prolong the evening.

Perversely, her acquiescence prompted him to say, 'Ah — but I should have more sense than to ply you with wine at this hour! Tomorrow is a busy day, for both of us.' He rose; obediently, she followed suit and took his proffered arm. When he guided her down the dark stairs to the courtyard, there was about her a feminine fragrance of innocence and youth.

He did not call a chaise, but walked her back to her lodgings through the dark furrows of the streets under the starlit sky. He encouraged her to talk; she had not had a chance to say a word during supper. She chatted happily, aglow with the evening, which to her must be like a dream. She talked about Margaret, what a wonderful woman she was, what immense courage she showed in staying on with the children despite all opposition; it was the first time he had heard about opposition, but it came as no surprise. To the minor powers Margaret's interference must seem like a threat.

When they arrived at the dark door of Ann's inn, he held her hand and said, 'I should like to invite you to supper again tomorrow, but I really wonder whether that would be wise. For your sake, I mean.'

'Why not?' He could not see her face in the darkness, but her voice sounded anxious. 'I would love to — unless I bore you?'

'No, no,' he said, smiling. 'Quite the reverse. But the walls have ears, the doors eyes. If we return tomorrow, there are certain to be whispers.'

She was silent for a while, then she pulled her hand out of his and said, 'I see. Well, in that case . . .'

'I do not believe you understand, my dear,' he said hastily. 'The only person who might be hurt by gossip would be you. People have a tendency to be lenient towards the frailties of aging Chief Justices. You are young, innocent . . .'

She tossed her head proudly, a rather risky gesture with that hat; then she said, 'For Margaret Fell I would sacrifice anything, anything at all.'

It was perhaps a mite theatrical, but he took it she wished to continue to sup with him. 'I see. Well, in that case . . . I'll be here at the usual time tomorrow. Good night.'

'Good night, sir.' She vanished quickly in the shadows of the doorway, the bell inside tinkled as she opened it. He smiled and started towards the castle. It had been quite a feat, to call the acceptance of a standing invitation to supper from a Lord Chief Justice a sacrifice for the sake of the man's wife. But she had the prerogative of youth to have her chain of logic tested by its strongest link. She was a companionable creature who made him feel mellow and pleasantly disposed, as would a really superlative wine. What a boon, to have come across her! Imagine being condemned to have his meals alone, to go to bed at sunset full of morose broodings about his health! He arrived at the warden's office in high spirits.

'Good evening, Hathaway. How are we tonight?'

'Good evening, Your Lordship.' The hunchback rose respectfully behind his desk. It did not make much difference, poor man. What a curse, to have to walk through life with that crooked back! Many women must have gone out of their way to touch his hump for luck.

'A lantern, please. I have some work to do.'

'I'm sorry, Your Lordship, all lanterns are gone. Justice Sawrey is up there.'

'What the devil do you mean? Up where?'

'He came in an hour ago, Your Lordship, and went to chambers. May I give you a candle? Shall I call the guard to accompany you?'

'A candle will do, thank you.' That Sawrey should use the chambers at this ungodly hour seemed an intolerable intrusion. It was not, of course; as provost, he had a perfect right to be here. But why the devil would a man want to work in chambers at this hour unless — unless he were carrying on a dalliance with a girl young enough to be his daughter, which filled him with such nervous zest that he could not sleep?

Sobered, he made his way down the dark corridor and up the flight of stairs towards chambers, shielding his candle flame as he went. As he approached the door, he saw a crack of light underneath it; when he opened it, he found Sawrey, hat on the back of his head, sprawled in the chair where he himself had sat the night before. He felt inordinately irritated at the sight. 'Good evening,' he said tersely. 'What gives me the pleasure of your company at this hour?'

The little man stared at him noncommittally. 'I was expecting you,' he said. 'I thought it was time you and I had a word.'

'About what?'

'About your good wife.'

It was perfectly legitimate and in order. As judiciary head of the prison this term, Sawrey had the duty to concern himself with what was going on. Yet the man's tone and the way he sat there rubbed him the wrong way. 'Is this necessary?' he asked coldly.

'I'm afraid it is. I've just come back from a visit with Mistress Fell. She requested permission to take the Jones boy out for a daily airing on the ramparts. I need not point out to you that there are aspects to this request that need to be discussed.'

'What the devil do you mean, visiting her at this hour? Wasn't she asleep?' It was a peevish question, but the idea of this creature going to see Margaret in her cell at dead of night revolted him.

'It is my custom to make the rounds of the prison at unpredictable hours. Ever since your good wife's arrival I have made a point of going to see her to find out if she might be in need of assistance. In my place, I trust you would do the same. I do not pretend I approve of what she is doing, but I am a married man myself. Women have their fancies. In my own case also, to indulge them has proven itself to be the best policy.'

'What's wrong with taking the boy out for an airing?'

'For one thing, there is the possibility of an escape.'

'From the ramparts?'

'Unlikely, but possible. I do not want the warden to grant permission unless we are covered against that eventuality.'

'How, pray?'

'What I had in mind was bail.'

His face stiffened. 'Like the bail you suggested Herbert Marshall demand of William Best?'

Sawrey looked at him balefully. 'I'll leave it to you to deter-

mine the size and the nature of the bail. The boy, as you know, has committed a murder of a particularly vicious kind.'

'Five pounds?'

Sawrey spread his hands. 'Anything you say. Then there is the fact that to take the boy for a walk every day might create a precedent.'

'How so?'

'Other prisoners in the same straits might justifiably ask for the same privilege. Unless, of course, there should be the possibility of a pardon. But that I would know about, wouldn't I?'

'Of course.'

'Well, let me talk it over with Hathaway and Dr. Withers and see what can be done to accommodate your wife.'

'Do whatever you see fit. Now could I have the desk? I have a stack of petitions to deal with.'

'Surely. Shall I leave the lantern?'

'Take it. I won't be leaving before dawn.'

'In that case, good night.' Sawrey picked up the lantern. 'By the way, a letter arrived for you. It's on the desk.'

'Oh?'

'Good night.'

'Good night.'

He picked up the letter thoughtfully. There was something in the way Sawrey had mentioned it . . . Magistrates' mail, the seal of the Palace of St. James's. He inspected the seal closely; it did not look as if it had been tampered with. He broke it.

As he unrolled the parchment, another letter fell out and he recognised, with a shock of alarm, his wife's handwriting. '*Dear Heart! As the father of thy people . . .*'

He read hers first, then old Shorwell's, then her letter again. This time he was struck not only by her incredible ingenuousness but by her undeniable sincerity. There could be no doubt as to her total involvement with the boy; her disregard of her own safety in the face of what she felt to be an urgent need for mercy was impressive. Chances were that Cromwell would have granted her request but at the same time, with typical puritanical righteousness, ordered her clapped in prison as a Quaker. Shorwell had rendered them a great service by returning the letter; Thomas wondered why the old fox had done it. By keeping it from Cromwell and writing that note to boot, he had taken a great risk, which was uncharacteristic of him. For the confidant of the late King to have continued as Cromwell's confident was a

feat of extraordinary political dexterity; to bring that off, a man had to be unemotional as a vulture, ruthless as a badger. Obviously, something in her letter had moved him to shield her from the consequences of her folly, despite the risk involved; it would seem she had been saved in the nick of time. But then there was Sawrey. He might have tampered with the seal, after all.

What was he to do? Go down there and tell her about the fate of her petition? He wandered over to the window and gazed out at the blank wall, the starry sky. No, if Sawrey had seen it, he had seen it; nothing he could do or say would change that fact. What could Sawrey do with the knowledge? He was crafty enough to realise that he would destroy himself if he were to engineer her prosecution as a Quaker under the limitations of the present proclamation, unless she committed an overtly subversive act. He need not warn her to watch her step with Sawrey, she was intelligent enough to do so of her own accord.

With a sigh, he returned to his desk to deal with the rest of the petitions, each one representing a human tragedy. A man could bear only so much; sufficient to each life the suffering thereof.

* * *

'*So I replied: "For Margaret Fell I would sacrifice anything, anything at all" and meant it wholeheartedly. I cannot understand now what made me feel so hostile towards her in the past; it is almost as if I had been another person then, a stranger. How could I fail to see the selflessness, courage, greatness of her gallant, self-effacing . . .*' Suddenly she felt moved by a devil inside to write '*ballocks*' – a word that had stayed in her mind ever since the boy had spat it at Margaret Fell and her high-tailed charity. She reared away from the book, aghast.

What did this mean? Well, it was quite clear: it meant that she had been trying to fool herself, even in her diary. For this was not the sweet, self-effacing Ann Traylor she had tried to foist upon herself. Sweet? A wolverine, a Salome . . . Oh, stop it! This was ridiculous.

'*. . . courageous, self-effacing . . .*' What had she been about to write? Oh yes, '*acts. The sheer moral purity of her . . .*' This time she found herself writing, '*savage determination to press-gang those miserable urchins into a choir, to scrub them as if they were garden statuettes, the insufferable high-handedness with which she sent her husband trotting all over town for children's clothes, a slop barrel, a piss pot . . .*' No! She could not write this! She

was spoiling her whole diary! But something forced her to go on, as if she were rolling down the side of a hill. Her quill raced across the pages, describing herself crudely, mercilessly. She could no longer swallow the nauseating pretence of the sweet, ingenuous maiden who had no idea she was engaged in a deliberate effort to seduce a man who found himself temporarily disoriented because of his wife's refusal to have anything to do with him. Then the question that had been haunting her surfaced once more.

'Who says that what Margaret Fell is doing is beautiful and godly? Who says that I must do the same as she, for the sake of my soul? If George Fox, that sanctimonious creeper, is right, if I am indeed unique, irreplaceable, never seen on earth before, never to be seen again, do I not have the right to be myself? The duty, even? What it boils down to is the question: Who am I? The pious churchmouse, mumbling about sacrifice? The weakling, infatuated with her mistress, who melted in the woman's embrace that night in her bed? Or the brazen hussy who brought the hat, caught the judge under it and, now she has captured him, does not know what to do with him? Or has the true Ann Traylor still not emerged? Is there still someone else within me, trying to get out? Is the fact that I suddenly find myself writing all this poisonous nonsense part of the effort of that true person to emerge? These pages of my diary are spoiled anyhow, so I might as well continue. Well then: so far I have been asking myself, "What are T.F.'s intentions?" It is time to ask myself what my intentions are, and to answer honestly.'

She frowned at her own frankness. Written down, it seemed terribly calculating and cold-blooded. Yet she must find out the truth of all this, soon. Time was short; in a few weeks the boy would be hanged and that would be the end. She felt in her bones that Margaret Fell would return home the moment the boy had been executed — if only because of the shock, for, despite her scrubbing and house-cleaning, she still seemed to live in a world of fantasy. The boy would be hanged, the children would be left exactly as they had been in the first place, once the moment came for her to return to her husband, her household. And what would happen to Ann Traylor in that event? Was she prepared to take up life as a governess again, be demure and subservient, wrap parcels for those dumbledores in prison, write sanctimonious letters full of pious cant about *that of God within*, as if it were the stuffing inside a turkey? And her hat? In a box, with

mothballs, stored away forever? And the judge turned blind again to her presence? Whatever happened, she would not go back to that! Not to the life of tight-lipped, tight-braided governess, primly trotting down the road to heaven. The very idea stifled her.

She rose, went to the window, opened it, breathed the cool night air and gazed at the stars. She remembered her premonition of a few days ago, when she had stood here like this. What then had seemed wishful thinking, a preposterous daydream, had become a reality: a rich man was hers for the taking. Yes, the taking; no point in deceiving herself. It was only a matter of days before she would have him in the palm of her hand. She had no experience worth speaking of in that respect, but feminine instinct told her: The trap is not yet sprung, but he is sniffing the bait.

What should she do now? Continue listening with dove's eyes, hanging on his lips, allowing herself to be plied with wine, pretending to become reckless? Instinct told her not to fret; he would take the lead at a given moment, the way he fancied he had from the beginning. What then? What was the future of the woman of the world with the jaunty hat? A rich old man who would give her material security and plenty of opportunity to entertain dashing young officers? Not a very edifying dream for someone who had at one time aspired to saintliness. What was the next stage? Have herself set up in rooms in an inn by Thomas Fell? Here in Lancaster, or in Cardiff, farthest on his circuit? It seemed a miserable existence: endless, boring days of waiting, a feeling of uncleanliness, corruption, dissipation . . . But what else? Stop this dangerous game, back away from Thomas Fell while there was still time? That gave her an unexpected feeling of emptiness, a sudden nausea, as if she were about to be sick. She went back to the table, frightened by the violence of her reaction. She took up the quill and wrote: *'What is this? Am I in love with him? Is that why I feel so terrible all of a sudden, so torn up at the thought that the wisest thing would be to send him away?'*

Anguished, but determined to discover the truth about herself, she went on writing, spoiling six pages of her diary, to arrive, in the end, at: *'Oh! How I love thee! How I love thee, damned old judge! I count the hours, the minutes until tomorrow evening when I will see thy shy, sad face break into a smile again, hear thee say, "Ah, good evening, Miss Traylor, good evening." Damn thee! Damn thee, Thomas Fell! I thought I was the spider*

and thou the fly! What am I going to do? What in the name of God am I going to do? Thomas! Thomas! God, I suffer! HOW I SUFFER!'

She stared at the scrawled words, underlined three times, a shriek of anguish that seemed to leap off the page. Then, with grim determination, she began to tear the pages out, one by one, and to burn them in the candle flame.

Each curling, blackening sheet devoured by fire was self-torture. She *was* desperate, she *was* in love with an unattainable man, she was doomed either to lead a life of sin and squalor or to waste her youth in servitude and chastity — dull, grey chastity. Her despair was real, her misery profound; when she went to bed at last, she expected to lie awake, hot-eyed, for hours. But she fell asleep instantly, to dream about a kite in the sky, the wind in the trees, the surf, sounding like laughter.

CHAPTER FOUR

CAREFULLY and with a finicky attention to detail, John Sawrey set the stage for Margaret Fell's self-incrimination. He accustomed her to his nightly visits, until, he was certain, she looked forward to them as the poacher had done. He managed to make her stand in a spot where Holly Stowe could hear her without being seen; this he contrived by putting himself on his seat-stick against the wall opposite her cell. He consistently discouraged any chit-chat and confined himself to reminding her that he was at her disposal. She had now, he knew, begun to deplore the brevity of his appearances; in this respect her husband had co-operated considerably by leaving her to her own devices. She had no one else to whom she could unburden herself; the maid was there only in the daytime and then they were both busy with the children. Everything was ready, there was no reason for him to tarry longer. But then Dr. Marshall's documents arrived, and they turned out to be disappointing.

John Sawrey scanned the doctor's letter gloomily in his room in the tower of Lancaster Castle. Next door the constable and Holly Stowe were starting what must be their fifteenth game of backgammon of the night; like himself, they had become adjusted to sleeping in the daytime and rising when the bats began

to circle the tower. But whereas the bats had plenty to do, the two men were forced to while away the hours doing nothing except quarrelling like an aged couple and playing backgammon. It was time Holly Stowe were given something to do, and that was another reason why John Sawrey had been eager to receive the information he had requested from Marshall.

Now the whole plan began to look like a private chimera.

'*In answer to your request for a summary of the heresies of the so-called "Children of the Light", I enclose the malediction invoked on the people called Quakers by the Presbyterian ministers of Scotland when George Fox first visited that country. It gives an admirable definition, readily understandable by the layman, of the grotesqueries and aberrations of the infidel Fox cum suibus.*' The accompanying paper contained a dreary series of pompous anathemae: '*One — Let all those who say Grace is free be cursed, and let the people say Amen. Two — Cursed be all they who say the Scriptures are not the word of God, and let the people say Amen. Three — Cursed be all they that say faith is without sin, and let the people say Amen.*' So it went on, one dreary curse after another, to end with, '*Seven — Cursed are all they that proclaim that every man has a light within him sufficient to lead him to Christ, and let the people say Amen.*'

It might be very effective when intoned in church with the appropriate voice of wrath, but in a court of law it would produce nothing but amused smiles on the faces of the counsel for the defence. Trying to make Margaret Fell's utterances fit these vague and emotional maledictions would be an exercise in futility.

The dossier on George Fox turned out to be just as unpromising. It was extensive enough; it described and quoted all the young man had done and said over the past two years; but, at first glance anyway, it seemed extremely biased, obviously compiled by vindictive ministers whose church services he had disrupted. Undeniably, the whole affair was a wild goose chase.

The object of his campaign had been to induce her eventually to commit a subversive act, impede the course of justice, not in private but in front of sufficient witnesses to ensure that Fell and Best would be unable to intimidate them. Her letter to Cromwell had given him hope, but she had done nothing since that could in any way be called emotional or impulsive.

What she had actually done, as any astute counsel would instantly point out, was to heed Christ's exhortation, 'Suffer little

children to come to Me and forbid them not.' She had, in the space of one week, transformed the cell into a nursery. She had, through her maid and her husband, arranged for cots to be brought down, a table, little stools, crockery, spoons; she and her maid had sewn curtains which could be drawn in front of the bunks in the wall, now used as cupboards. She herself slept on a field bed in a corner of the cell and had managed to establish a degree of privacy by surrounding it with a screen, also provided by her husband, whom she used as an errand boy. She not only read the Bible to the children before going to sleep, she prevailed upon them to kneel by the side of their cots and intone a prayer like a bunch of jackdaws. When described by witnesses, all this could not fail to present a heart-rending picture of child conversions.

The more he considered it, the less point there seemed to be in continuing. He thought of calling it all off and sending Holly home; instead he decided to start recording Mistress Fell's precious words that very night. The cause of his decision was a violent dispute between the two bored men in the room next door, the like of which he had not heard before. There were screams, curses, a grumbling of furniture; when he appeared in the doorway he saw Holly Stowe standing at the window, a picture of querulous indignation; the constable, ham-fisted, seemed about to throw himself upon him.

'What on earth is going on here?' he cried, like a mother bursting into her children's room. 'What are you fighting about *this* time?'

'Guess what he did!' Holly Stowe squealed, pointing at the open window. 'Guess what he did with the dice!'

'Which dice?'

'He couldn't stand losing any more, so he stuffed them in his mouth and spewed them out of the *window*!'

Normally Sawrey would have been mollified by the spectacle this evoked; under the circumstances he came close to screaming at them and their childish antics. 'Well,' he said coldly, 'it seems the time has come for you to do some work. Stowe, get thy papers ready. Constable, light the lantern. We are going down.'

On the way, he repeated once more the instructions which, by now, they should know by heart. 'Holly, thou wilt stand in front of the cell with the madwomen. Stay as close to the bars as thou canst without giving them a chance to grab thy writing tablet or any part of thy person, but make sure under all circumstances to

remain out of sight of Mistress Fell. Constable, thou wilt hold the lantern for him, facing the lunatics, ready to warn Holly should they be up to tricks. Do so without a sound; we don't want Mistress Fell to realise that there are two of you. Holly, write only what she says; I will insert my own questions in thy transcript. Try and take down her words *verbatim* . . .'

They crossed the courtyard and descended the interminable steps, the constable lighting the way. When they arrived on the lowest level and entered the corridor leading to her cell, Sawrey was overcome by an excitement, a sudden tension that made his scalp prickle, yet was quite pleasurable. He did not know what to compare it with, he had never felt a sensation like it. The poacher had mentioned it, in one of his monologues. '*You stalk a doe for the kill, a little closer each time, and when the kill comes, there's nothing like it, in the whole world.*' At the time, he had judged it another of the man's sentimental absurdities; now he discovered the truth of it. There was in the gradual encirclement of Margaret Fell an excitement that was almost sensual. He should, really, give it some careful consideration later that night and decide if an extraneous emotion were building up inside him that might trip him up at the decisive moment. It certainly should be watched.

Her cell, as they approached, was dark, as it had been every night. He had made a point of arriving when the children were sure to be asleep, except for the boy, who seemed to be awake at all hours, peering at him from a corner with his solitary, unblinking eye. He took off his gloves and tapped on the iron bars with his signet ring, calling courteously, 'Mistress Fell?'

Since erecting that screen around her field bed, she was usually asleep by the time he appeared; before, she had just dozed sitting there, the children gathered around her like a litter.

'Just a moment, Mr. Sawrey.'

'Take your time, Mistress Fell, please. I did not intend to waken you.'

It was by now the traditional gambit with which their encounters opened. He heard rustling and creaking behind the screen; the children were fast asleep in their cots, the infernal boy was crouching in his corner wide awake, his eye glinting in the lantern light, Holly Stowe, who despite his elderly fussiness was astute and decisive when it came to the point, took up his position without unnecessary dithering; the constable, less endowed with grey matter, had to be manoeuvred into place like a mule.

Holly Stowe had just signalled that he was ready, pencil poised on his slate, when she appeared from behind her screen looking, if anything, somewhat less tainted by prison life than last time.

'Madam, your obedient servant.' He honoured her with the customary bow and sweep. 'I trust you are well?'

'Very well, thank you, Mr. Sawrey.'

He smiled. 'It is, Madam, a pleasure to inform you that permission for a daily walk on the ramparts has finally been granted by the regents. You will be allotted fifteen minutes, counting from the moment you arrive on the upper level. It has been arranged that a guard will accompany you, for obvious reasons.'

He had delayed granting the permission until he was ready to start the interrogation, in the expectancy that it might put her in a mood to talk. He had not expected the emotional effusiveness with which she reacted. 'Oh, Mr. Sawrey! How wonderful!' she cried. 'Thank you, sir, thank you, thank you!' and she reached for him through the bars like the madwomen.

He took her hand and said, 'But, Madam, it is nothing. It was a privilege to arrange it for you.'

'Henry!' she cried, turning to the boy in the corner. 'Didst thou hear that, Henry? Isn't that wonderful? Oh, Mr. Sawrey, I cannot tell you what a joy this is, how — oh, this is wonderful! Truly wonderful!'

He opened his seat-stick and took up his position against the wall. Her enthusiasm was not only surprising, it filled him with a hunter's excitement. This was better than he had dared hope; but he should proceed with great delicacy. 'Well, Madam, I am glad indeed that I have been able to please you. I wish there were more I could do.'

'Oh, Mr. Sawrey, you have done so much already! Truly, I can't tell you how — how grateful I am!' He had the impression that she had wanted to say 'how surprised I am.'

'I'm flattered, Madam, but I must confess that I have no idea what you mean. I have asked every day if you had any wishes; thus far you have made only one request. Now, is there anything else I can do for you? Don't hesitate, I am entirely at your disposal.'

'I — I really don't know what else you could do, honestly. Just to know that I can count on your interest and support is sufficient. It truly is. I don't think you realise what a difference it makes, to know that someone — ' She stopped; but it was obvious what she had intended to say.

'I think what you are doing is very charitable indeed,' he said. 'I have been wondering, though, how you expect to continue this sort of care, all by yourself.'

She took the bait, without a moment's hesitation. 'Of course I have been thinking about that all the time! You see, there is nothing special in what I have done, I just happen to be the first. I am convinced that there are many Christian matrons like myself who will be prepared to spend some time with these children.'

'I am afraid I must disagree with you, Mistress Fell. I do not think you will find any ladies in this town prepared to do what you are doing. I'm afraid this needs a special kind of person.'

Holly Stowe was writing furiously, the fool! He had told him not to take down his questions, but, obviously, there were limits to the old man's intelligence. Now was the moment she was going to commit herself, if he was lucky.

But, despite her ebulliance, she had all her wits about her. 'I think you'll be pleasantly surprised, Mr. Sawrey,' she said, smiling. 'You underestimate the Christian virtue of the ladies of this town.' It was charmingly put, but the old wariness was back in her eyes. She was not going to show her hand. She was a match for him, that was sure.

Even so, he felt hopeful again. He wondered why. It had to do with something intangible, instinctive; nothing she had said or done justified this sudden reversal. Was it her emotional relationship with that boy? He was the central figure. She obviously had not quite realised yet what lay ahead for him. Could he risk hinting at that? What condition was she in? Was she beginning to show any nervousness, the gradual loss of self-control that was typical of prisoners?

He rose, folded his seat-stick, put it under his arm and approached the bars, pulling on his gloves. Close to the bars he said quietly, with concern, 'Madam, there is something I must mention to you, if you will forgive me.'

'Yes?' Her wariness was, somehow, extremely exciting.

'I do not wish to dampen your high spirits, but I wonder whether you are aware that to take the boy out for walks on the wall may make things more difficult?'

'For whom?'

'For him. I have experience in these situations. Do not be misled by the way he behaves now. It is the aggressive ones, the

rebellious ones that, when the noose — well. Don't make it more difficult for him than is necessary.'

'I fail to see your point, sir.' She said it coldly, almost haughtily, but, close to her as he was at that moment, he sensed her nervous tension, as if it were a quiver transmitted to him through the bars.

'Forgive me, Madam.' He smiled and pulled on his gloves. 'I am sure you will find the strength to cope with that situation, just as you have found it to do this admirable work.'

'It is not my strength, Mr. Sawrey,' she said firmly. 'It is my faith in God.'

'Quite. Quite.' He turned to go.

'I am convinced that when the time comes God will show the way.'

He stopped. 'The way to what, Madam?' It was bold, but something in her voice had made him prick up his ears.

'The Lord will provide.'

He was certain that was not what she had intended to say. What had she meant? The way to what?

But he had gone as far as he could safely go. He doffed his hat, swept it, bowed and made a leg. 'Madam, your servant. Forgive me for disturbing you.'

'Not at all, Mr. Sawrey. Not at all. Good night to you.'

'Good night, Madam. Constable!'

He walked down the corridor towards the stairs without acknowledging Holly Stowe's presence. Only when they arrived on the landing did he ask, 'Didst thou manage to get anything down?'

'I think I got all of it, or most of it,' the old man said eagerly.

'Well, work it out as soon as we are back in our quarters. I'd like to look over what she said, especially that business about God at the end.'

'I got all of that. I'll work on it straightaway. It should not take long, an hour or so.'

'Very good.'

But as they mounted the stairs his newfound certainty dwindled; when they arrived in the tower it seemed as if his brief moment of self-confidence had been an illusion. As he sat in his chair again, his feet propped up on the bed, morosely gazing at the perpendicular sliver of starry sky caught in the embrasure, he reconsidered his optimism of a moment ago with bitterness. Even if her relationship with the boy were emotional, even if the hanging were to shatter her as it undoubtedly would, what good

would it do? Downstairs, he had thought for a moment she might do something impulsive during the hanging, lose control, interfere, try to stop the hangman. But even if she did, could it be made to look like impediment of justice? She would simply be a pathetic, emotional woman pleading for mercy at the last moment, a subject for sympathy rather than the reverse.

Next door, behind the paper wall, the constable started to hum the infernal madrigal she made the children squeal each day, and Sawrey was about to silence him when he heard Holly Stowe's voice, 'Oh, stop that! Canst thou not see I'm working?' The constable growled, 'Excuse *me*, I'm sure.'

Well, there was no point in going to bed yet; he had to wait around until Holly Stowe had something to show for his efforts. What was more, he was wide awake. He picked up the dossier that Dr. Marshall had sent him, marked *'The Case Against George Fox, Blasphemer, Lancaster Assizes, Trinity 1652.'* It was, for the clergy, methodically done, complete with index of subjects and names. He looked up 'hangings', not expecting to find the word at all, but there it was — *'hanging, interrupted by G.F., Derby jail, July 1650'.*

Interrupted? He leafed to the page indicated. *'On the second of July, a woman named Hazel Hawthorne, sentenced to be hanged for stealing, was brought to the scaffold in the courtyard of Derby jail. George Fox was imprisoned there at the time and had written to various judges and magistrates in an attempt to have her sentence commuted, basing his appeal on the Scriptures, more particularly the commandment "Thou shalt not kill". When the moment came for the springing of the trapdoor, the executioners found themselves immobilised by a shout from the window of the cell in which the blasphemer was incarcerated. He shouted at them a word variously interpreted as "Stop!", "God!" or "No!" As a result, a spell was thrown over the men, who were paralysed to the extent that they could not proceed with the execution. The woman was taken back to her cell and the matter was brought in front of Sir Gervase Bennett, acting provost. Fox was sentenced to serve a supplementary three months after completion of his term, the charge being "impeding the course of justice". The woman in question has not been executed as of this writing; the warden of Derby jail moved into the prisoner's cell and was subsequently dismissed, as he joined the people called Quakers.'*

He lowered the book. If something like this were to happen

here in Lancaster, in front of the crowd to be expected at this hanging, the perpetrator would receive a much harsher sentence than three months. Could she be prevailed upon to do the same? What exactly had happened, anyhow? Was it indeed a spell the man had thrown over the executioners, or what?

Whatever it was, it smacked of a miracle. That was, obviously, why everyone concerned had been intimidated, hence their over-cautious reaction to the extraordinary incident. Carter Barton, the local hangman, would be less readily impressed by someone shouting 'Stop!' at the crucial moment during an execution.

Think, he told himself. Think it through from the beginning. Try to put thyself in her place. There is the boy, about to be hanged. It has not become reality to her yet; she will have to be made to face it. Forcibly, if possible. An emotional shock of some sort . . .

He rose, went to the window and stared at the night. The stars were hazy with thin, swift clouds from the sea. There was a new moon, its back to the wind, blurred by the clouds scudding past. He knew he was on the right track. Shock. An emotional shock. When? Obviously, the first time she took the boy out for his walk. How? What?

It took a while before he hit upon the answer; despite the hour, he went downstairs to arrange it.

* * *

In spite of Sawrey's ominous last words, Margaret Fell was so elated with his permission to take Henry outside that she could hardly sleep. She had given up hope that her request would ever be granted; now she realised how desperately she had been yearning for a breath of fresh air, not only for Henry but for herself. She had spent a mere three weeks in the dungeon, but already she felt as if she had not seen the sun for years. She was happy now that she had not given in to the temptation to sneak out for an hour or so, leaving Ann with the children. She had always known that the only way to establish a relationship with Henry was to share his world.

The moment Sawrey was gone, she could not contain herself; she went to the boy crouched in his corner, put her arms around him and said, 'Henry, Henry, isn't it wonderful? Tomorrow! Tomorrow we can go outside!'

But he did not share her excitement. There was still a wall of suspicion between them. But it no longer disturbed her; least of

all, that night. In her elation she knelt by her cot and thanked God from the bottom of her heart for this blessing, this wonderful surprise. It strengthened her conviction, unspoken but deep-rooted, that Oliver Cromwell would respond to her plea and grant the boy his pardon. It was the only condition on which she could face the fact that Henry was sentenced to be killed, brutally, ten days from now.

Her night was restless and she was up earlier than usual. Never had she looked forward so intensely to anything since she was a child. She expected the guard to come for them from the moment she awoke; only when she went to call the children did she realise it was a ridiculous hour even in the world of the prison, where life began before daybreak while it was still dark outside. To expect to be taken for a walk on the ramparts at four in the morning was ridiculous. She really had to get a hold on herself, this was foolish. But as the morning progressed, she became more restless, more impatient. Ann arrived with the laundry; they spent some time changing the children's clothes before starting the lesson of the morning; but not for a second could Margaret forget the treat that lay in store; she found herself running to the bars to try and peer down the passage at the slightest sound out there.

But the morning passed, agonisingly, without anyone coming for them. The hour of noon passed. Ann prepared to leave, as she had to hand in their washing at the inn; still the guard had not come. When Ann left, Margaret asked her to enquire upstairs; perhaps they had forgotten about them; perhaps Sawrey had forgotten to instruct the warden. Ann promised to do so; for the first time the girl's eagerness to leave did not disturb her.

Two o'clock. Three o'clock. Four o'clock; still the guard had not come. She was about to blow her whistle, something she had not done for a long time, when, all of a sudden, there he was.

'Mistress Fell? I've come to take you and the boy out for a spell. Are you ready?'

'Oh, we surely are! Yes, yes, of course! Henry, quick! Henry!'

The boy, sullenly, stayed in his corner.

'Come on, Henry, come on! We're going for a walk outside! Come, child, come!' She put her arm around his shoulders and tried to guide him to the door. To her astonishment, he balked.

'What's the matter? Dost thou not wish to come?'

The boy did not reply. He looked at her fiercely with his solitary eye, his face set in a scowl.

She knelt by his side, put her hands on his thin arms and pleaded, 'Oh, Henry, please don't do that to me, please! I have so looked forward to taking thee out, now please don't be stubborn! Come! Come, if it were only to do me the pleasure. Yes?'

He peered at her, and the expression on his face changed. He seemed to look much older than his age, with a bitter, resigned wisdom. He did not say a word, but his shoulders slumped; it felt like a surrender.

'Come, Henry, come! It's not going to be terrible, it's going to be wonderful!' Thou wilt see; once we are out there, thou wilt enjoy it immensely, I know it!' Chattering nervously, she led him to the open door, and they followed the guard as he went down the corridor. She had her arms around the shoulders of the little boy; he let himself be guided, but his steps were hesitant, not only because he had to drag his chains; it seemed as if he was prepared at any moment to turn around and shuffle back into the security of their cell. It was very odd, but she had the same sensation. The moment she set foot outside that cage where she had stayed only so short a while, she felt insecure. She was trembling with apprehension; the prospect of a walk in the sun suddenly no longer seemed at all attractive. What in the world had possessed her to ask for it? She was overcome by the compulsion to turn around and hurry back to the children. She should not have left them alone; she should have asked Ann to stay with them while she was gone. But she knew it was not because of the children that she felt this way; it was that strange sense of insecurity.

As they climbed the stairs, she discovered that she tired much more quickly. In the beginning she had climbed the many flights without pausing for breath; now she had to call 'Please!' on each landing, to make the guard stop and give her a chance to catch her breath. She stood leaning against the wall, eyes closed, heart pounding; poor Henry had the same trouble; towards the end of their climb he could barely lift his feet with those chains. Her own feet seemed to weigh like lead; as they approached the top level she had to pause halfway up the flight of steps. At last, there was the door to the castle gateway, the first light of day in almost three weeks.

But they did not go out into the gateway; there was a small door in the wall that she had never noticed before. The guard

opened it and, to her horror, she saw another flight of steps. 'Must we?' she gasped.

The guard, surprised, turned around. 'Beg pardon, ma'am?'

'Must we climb more steps?'

'Well, ma'am, I'm supposed to take you to the ramparts.'

'How many more?'

'Huh?'

'How many more flights are there?'

'I don't rightly know, maa'm. From here on, though, there are no more landings.'

'Oh. I see. Very well, let's go. So long as you don't mind stopping frequently. We really aren't used to this any more.'

'Very well, ma'am.' The guard seemed puzzled. 'We will take it slowly, ma'am.'

'Thank you, bless you.'

It became the longest climb she had ever made. Poor Henry, when they got to the third turn of the spiral, sat down on the steps, whimpering with exhaustion. But there was light just above them, bright and inviting. 'Look, Henry, look,' she said, 'there's the sunlight, right ahead of us! Dost thou see it? That's where we are going. We are nearly there! Come, love; come, let me help thee.'

They stumbled on, like two convalescents after a long illness, until at last they reached the source of the beckoning light. It turned out to be an embrasure through which a narrow beam of sunlight slanted down into the well of the stairs. She was dying to inhale the fresh air, but so concerned about Henry not being able to make it that, with her last ounce of strength, she lifted him to look through the narrow opening. He was heavy because of the chains and her strength had been sapped by the long climb; she could lift him only for a few seconds. With a moan, she put him down again with a rattle of iron and leaned against the wall. 'Dist thou see the sun?' she asked, eyes closed.

He did not answer. He sat at her feet, his head in his hands. Poor boy, because of those chains he must be more exhausted than she was, she had had no idea how heavy they were. They rested for a long time, while the guard waited patiently a few steps above them. It was quiet on the steps; once her heart had stopped banging, she began to discern sounds from the outside world that were as precious as the breath of fresh air she had caught: voices, hammering, the sounds of freedom and activity.

She opened her eyes, looked up at the guard and asked, 'Is it far?'

'No, ma'am, three more turns and we are there. Do you think you can make it?'

'Yes, yes . . . we're almost ready.' She put her hand to her breast; even to talk was exhausting. 'He's very weak.'

'Take your time, ma'am. I am in no hurry.' He seemed a kind man; she should really pay a little more attention to him, instead of treating him as a means to an end. She wondered how George was, where he was, why she had not heard from him. Did he know what she was doing? Silly question. 'Come, Henry,' she said, 'we are nearly there.' She pulled him up by his arms; he lifted his feet wearily up the high steps. She picked up his chains and carried them for him the rest of the way.

When finally she staggered into the open of a bright, wind-swept afternoon, she was overcome by giddiness. The mere breath of clean sea air swirling around her made her lightheaded. almost drunk. She stood clutching Henry for support; during the first moments she felt as if she were about to dissolve in the boundless space of sunlight and wind. Then she heard the guard say, 'Ma'am? If you want to go and walk, you should do so. We have not much time left.'

'Yes . . . yes, thank you . . . Come, Henry.'

With an effort, she started along the ramparts. When they reached the parapet, she stood still, eyes closed, blinded by the daylight. Merely to breathe that delicious air was pure heaven. She raised her face towards the sun, feeling its warmth, pressing the shivering little body of the child against her. The hammering was louder now, and she heard the rumble of planks; they brought memories of carpenters and masons, the bustle and the excitement of a house being built. She opened her eyes and looked down into the courtyard of the castle; sunlight glinted on the roofs, the towers; down there in the shadows were the carpenters, hammering. Then she saw what they were building. A scaffold, with a gibbet.

'Oh, no!' She cried out in horror, grasped Henry's head and pressed it against her so he would not see it. For a moment her mind was a blank; then her first thought was: 'On purpose! They did it on purpose! They kept us waiting so long on purpose!'

She turned around and, dragging Henry with her, stumbled to the parapet on the other side; there she stood, tears running down her face, swamped with horror. It was for Henry they were

building it — no! She could not face it, she could not! In desperation she tried to look at the sky, the sea, but all she could see through her tears were three little buttercups growing in a crack between the granite blocks of the parapet. The sight of those fragile flowers trembling in the wind broke down her last defence. She slumped forward, her head on her arms, and cried her heart out, knowing that it was wrong, she should not be doing this to Henry, she was being weak, stupid; but she could not help herself, it seemed as if all her strength, her faith, her hope had suddenly collapsed. It was so cruel, so heinous, like an idiot pulling the wings off a fly to watch its mutilated body stagger, the way she and the boy had staggered up those stairs. 'Oh, God, oh, God!' she moaned. 'Save him, save him . . .' But even as she spoke the words, she realised their futility. There was no one to pray to, no fount of mercy in the universe, no God of love. Somebody touched her arm. She looked up, ready to follow the guard back down.

But it was Henry. He was holding something out to her; a little yellow flower, one of the buttercups. She stared at it, confused; then he said, 'Here,' and proffered it once more.

'For — for me . . . ?'

He nodded.

'Oh . . . Henry . . .' She could barely speak. She took the little flower and pressed his frail body against hers. 'Oh, my dear, my very dear — oh, God . . .' She hugged him, kissed his hair, in a senseless, helpless outpouring of love. Finally she managed to get hold of herself, wipe her tears and say, smiling, 'Well, who would have thought that I would be offered a posy on the walls of Lancaster Castle?'

As she said it, she saw that he knew. He looked at her with a terrible understanding. 'Oh, God,' she whispered, taking him in her arms again. 'What can I do, what can I do?!'

It was a cry, not a question. Then he said, his voice stifled by her embrace, 'Stay with me.'

She knew at once what he meant. Despite her desperate concern for him, she froze. She had managed not to think about the execution at all; the certainty of Cromwell's personal intervention had blotted it out. Now it had suddenly become reality; to envisage that she would have to be present was unbearable. But, seeing the little flower, she realised that, despite his bravado and his lonely rebellion, he was a frightened child. She must not fail him. 'Yes, Henry,' she said. 'Of course I will.'

'Where I can see thee when they put it over my head,' he said matter-of-factly.

'I will.' She kissed his hair. 'Come, let's go back.' Together they turned around and walked towards the guard in the doorway.

'We are ready to go back,' she said.

The man's face was impassive, but suddenly he said, 'You take the lantern, ma'am. I'll carry him,' and he picked up Henry, chains dangling.

She went ahead of them, down into the dungeons, wondering what had made him do that. He must have seen the boy give her the flower; it must have touched him. If a man like him could be touched, why not Cromwell? It gave her a brief resurgence of hope. Something would happen, something would prevent this monstrous crime, be it in the nick of time. The Lord would provide.

At the entrance to their corridor, the guard said, 'Well, ma'am, you know the rest of the way. Can I leave you here?'

'Yes, of course. Thank you, thank you very much.'

'Don't mention it, ma'am.'

He lowered the boy gently to the ground, picked up his lantern and hurried back up the stairs.

'Come, Henry.' Her arm around the child's shoulder, she set out towards their dungeon. As they passed the cell of the madwomen, a voice whispered, 'Miss!'

At the bars stood a woman, looking terrible and pitiful, but with a face that, despite the scabs, was surprisingly sensitive and cultured. 'Please,' the voice whispered, 'help us! Not just the children, us too! Please, M'Lady, help us, in the name of God ...'

'But ... but how?' she asked, gazing at the cage full of witches.

'Just come and talk to us!' the voice whispered. 'Just come and talk, perhaps sing, read the Bible ... We are not mad all the time, you know, only some of the time. It is when we realise it that it's — it's the worst.' Suddenly the voice breathed, 'Be careful! Be careful of that man who comes every night! There's someone writing down every word you say!'

'What's that?'

Suddenly, hair-raisingly, the woman burst into shrieking laughter and started to slam her chains against the bars, arousing all the other wretches in the cage, who instantly joined in making

that terrifying noise. She hurried Henry to their cell, deeply distressed; there were the children, waiting for her. The delight with which they leaped on her, all wanting to be hugged at the same time, made her forget for a while.

After they had been fed and bathed, had said their prayers and been put to bed, and she had whispered a little private story to each one of them as her own children loved her to do, she finally sat down on her cot behind the screen to think.

So that was why Sawrey had come to see her every night, why he had been at such pains to offer his services. She did not doubt that what the women had told her was true. Some mad compulsion drove him to weave this intricate web of subterfuge; he must have postponed his permission for them to walk on the walls until the building of the scaffold was started. But why? A mentality like his was totally alien to her. It was obvious now that every move he made, every word he spoke served some nefarious purpose, was part of some scheme in his sick mind. Had not George Fox named him as an example of those whose souls were beyond redemption, those ultimate punishment he recorded in his Book of Rewards?

There was only one thing she could do: confront him. He was sure to turn up that night to find out how the outing had affected her. Well, she would tell him. She would tell him point blank that he was . . . She could not find the words to describe him. If ever she had despised a human being, it was he.

It seemed hours before she finally heard the sound of footsteps and saw the light of a lantern coming down the passage. She waited until he tapped on the bars with his signet ring; then, instead of replying as usual, 'Just a moment, Mr. Sawrey, I'll be right there,' she stepped from behind the screen and faced him.

'Good evening, Mistress Fell. How are we tonight? Did you enjoy your little outing?'

She took a breath to say, 'You devil—' but could not bring herself to do so. His face with the dead, slitted eyes was masklike in its remoteness from reality, from life itself; suddenly his scheme, the whole elaborate nonsense of bringing a scribe to take down every word she said, seemed so insane that her resolve to challenge him dissolved.

'I'm a little tired tonight, Mr. Sawrey,' she said. 'It was kind of you to arrange for that walk, but it turned out to be more tiring than I had expected.'

'Ah?' He observed her with that odd, insane intensity.

'It was not very kind of you, though, to arrange for the scaffold to be built just at this time.'

His eyes did not blink. He went on gazing at her with that unnerving intensity. 'That was regrettable,' he said. 'But it was time you started to face the inevitable. I am sorry to inform you that there is no hope for a pardon. I trust you are going to be sensible about it. I would not want you to try what George Fox did to the hangmen in Derby jail.'

She managed to control herself. 'You are very knowledgeable, Mr. Sawrey,' she said with a smile.

'Should you be tempted to consider the possibility, then I must warn you that Carter Barton is different from those men. There are other differences, of which no doubt you are aware.'

'Who is Carter Barton?'

'The executioner, Madam.'

'Good night, Mr. Sawrey,' she said, letting go of the bars.

'Good night, Madam, your humble servant.' He made his bow and sweep.

Back behind the screen, she slumped down on her bed, exhausted. Yet. she told herself, something good had come of it all: Sawrey had given her the answer. She would do what George had done: appeal to that of God in the executioners. He had done it, so she could do it, despite what she thought about his miracles. He had said so himself, many times: it was not he who had the power; he had been in the power of the Lord. Wearily she rose and fetched the candle to have a look at the children before retiring for the night. She went silently from cot to cot, tucking them in, and ended by putting little Jody on the pot, fast asleep, leaning against her. There were only a few bedbugs on the child, and she plucked them off routinely; then she put Jody back in her cot and went to look at Henry, who still lay, every night, rolled up like a dog at the foot of the wall, although there was a cot for him. She stood looking down on him, his sad, old face, and decided to do what she had wanted to do for some time. She put down the bottle with the candle, picked him up without waking him and carried him to her bed. There she tucked him in, chains and all. She went back to fetch the candle and settled down to sleep the way she had slept the first nights, sitting in the straw, leaning against the wall. She was so tired she could sleep anywhere; he would probably be ready to use his own cot on the morrow. She might put it behind the screen with hers.

Suddenly she was struck by doubt, a quaver of panic. But she checked herself. She must have faith. Now, of all times, she must have faith. There was no turning away from it; she must face it now, prepare herself to let that of God in her fly with that one word, 'Stop!' It would flash across the courtyard like an arrow, fuse with that of God in the hangmen as it had in Derby jail and they would not have the power to hang him. She folded her hands and bent her head and centred down, into the silence.

* * *

'*Are these the normal effects of imprisonment?*' Henrietta Best read. '*This sense of insecurity, of not daring to venture outside the cell? I know thou hast experience in this respect and I am sorely in need of some reassurance. Hast thou during thy incarceration known strange extremes of mood? From high spirits and over-confidence down to the depths of doubt and lack of faith in oneself, even, at times, in the power of God?*'

Henrietta Best lowered the letter and looked out of the window at the darkening summer garden. A nightingale sang in one of the ilex trees; the scent of roses was wafted towards her by the warm air, rising in the chill of the night. The dungeons of Lancaster Castle seemed far away from this world of beauty and gentleness. She closed her eyes and listened to the nightingale. How was it possible that men could do such atrocious things in the darkness under the ground, where they dragged their screaming victims by their hair to — no, no, not that.

What did the poor woman expect her to answer? 'Yes, *ma chère*, that is all quite normal; and there is more: there are whips, and iron stakes driven into the ground to which to tie spread-eagled, naked females. Thou wishest for my advice? Don't wait until the turnkeys have raped thee, become the warden's mistress while thou still hast the chance.'

She dropped the letter and covered her face with her hands. She did not hear the door, or the soft footsteps of the little girl who crept into the room. She nearly jumped when her wrist was touched by a small, cold hand. It was Mary, in her nightgown.

'What is it, *mon chouchou*? Canst thou not sleep?'

The child solemnly shook her head. It was these infernal long evenings; darkness fell so much later in Lancashire in summer than it did in France. But Tonton had always had trouble falling asleep too, summer nights. 'Come,' she said, 'let me take thee

back to bed. If thou art good, I'll tell thee a story.' She bent down to pick up the child.

'When is Mother coming back?'

'She won't be long now. Another week or two and she'll be home again.'

'I want Mother to come back.'

'Of course thou dost. We all do. But she is doing something truly wonderful, something that one day will make you all very proud.'

A harsh, hostile voice asked, 'Will it?' She looked up and there stood Meg, the oldest girl, in the doorway, her young, unformed face, normally so bland and pretty, twisted in an unpleasant scowl.

'Hast thou come to fetch her'? Henrietta asked.

'I have. Come, Mary.' Meg came into the room briskly, without tenderness.

'No!' Henrietta cried, despite herself. She could not stand unkindness at that moment. 'Let me take her, I was about to.'

'Why should you, now I'm here?'

'Because I want a word with thee. Wait here a moment, I'll be right back.'

Hastily Henrietta gathered the child in her arms and carried her out into the passage and to her room. 'I know I promised to tell thee a story, Mary,' she whispered as they went, 'but I have to talk to Meg. Wilt thou forgive me? I'll tell thee a long story tomorrow.'

'Very well.' It sounded resigned. How sad that one had to learn so early that life was full of disappointments and long stretches of loneliness. She put the child to bed, bent over her to kiss her and went to close the curtains more tightly; but the day lingered on the ceiling.

Meg was waiting for her by the window. She looked defiant, but it was a good sign to find her there at all. Margaret Fell had written on her long mother's list, '*Meg: At the age when she is trying to find her own feet and can do so only by being angry with her elders.*'

'Tell me, Meg,' she asked, 'why art thou so angry with thy mother?'

The girl gazed at her sombrely, or tried to; it was difficult with those exquisite features.

'Art thou not proud of what she is doing?'

Meg shrugged her shoulders and turned away to the window.

'As far as I can see, all she has done is desert her own family. For the sake of what? Some criminal children in prison. What does she expect to achieve? Cancel their punishment? I can't see anything admirable in that.'

'What she is doing is to fight inhumanity where she met it. We all meet inhumanity in our lives; the world, alas, is full of it. Few of us have the courage to do something about it; she had. And, believe me, it takes courage.'

'I can't see anything courageous about it,' the girl said surlily. 'What courage does it need to go and mope around some children in prison if your husband is its highest authority. She even took a chaperone.'

'Who was promptly raped the very first day.'

'What'? The child swung around and faced her, her face blank with astonishment.

'Forgive me, I should not have said that. She was attacked by a man in the dungeons the first day. Luckily the worst was avoided. But keep this to thyself, I pray thee.'

'But that — that is terrible! That's — what did Father do?

What had the judge done? What could he do? 'I don't know, dear. It is part of the reality of prison: women walking the corridors unescorted are likely to be attacked. He cannot change that.

'But the entire prison system is under his rule! Surely he can do something!'

How much the child had to learn! 'My dear, even a man in the highest position of authority can do nothing about what happens in dungeons a hundred feet below the ground unless he goes there himself. That is exactly what thy mother is trying to show us; there is no point condemning evil and expecting others to fight it. Unless we are prepared to fight it ourselves, we had better turn away and hold our tongues. Which is what most people do.'

'Why did Mother have to take Ann?' the girl cried suddenly. 'Why could she not have taken *me*? We're the same age!'

It took Henrietta a moment to recover; then she said laconically, 'And have thee raped instead of her?'

'I wish to be a Quaker too! Why should I be protected from something that Ann is supposed to be strong enough to face?'

Henrietta sighed, and picked up the letter. 'Let me read this to thee.' The girl sat down with her back to the lingering day. The

nightingale sang exultantly behind her. Henrietta flipped open her lorgnette. 'There are things in here that I am sure she did not intend for her children's ears, but then, thou art Meg Fell now, nobody's child but God's. Or dost thou object to God's parenthood too?'

'I do not object to anyone's parenthood,' the girl replied. 'Pray read the letter.'

'*Dearly beloved Friend. I am sitting here in the straw of the children's dungeon, by the cot of an eleven-year-old boy, his ankles chained together, due to be hanged nine days from now. I am writing to thee because I promised him I would be with him in his last moments, and I am afraid that, when the time comes, my strength will fail.*'

The nightingale sang in the darkening garden while she read. She did not look at the girl until she had finished the last line, '*So, although thou and I once doubted the validity of miracles, here I am with nothing left to hope for except that, at the last moment. God in His love and mercy may save this child's life, for the sake of His own martyred Son, Whose presence is about tonight.*'

There was silence; then the girl asked, 'Will he?'

'What?'

'Save the little boy's life?'

'I doubt it.' She folded the letter.

'Then, what will she have achieved? What good will she have done those children? When she leaves, all they will know, those who aren't dead by then, is that a woman came, spoiled them for a month and left. I doubt whether I would, in their place, be thankful for her visit.'

Henrietta Best smiled wearily. Maybe this was why mankind had made so little progress, despite the shining examples of prophets and saints and Christ Himself. Each generation had to fight the same battle all over again, the battle for its own soul. She suddenly felt tired.

'And Ann Traylor? Is she going to be at the execution too?' It sounded peevish; perhaps because of the nightingale.

'I have no idea,' Henrietta replied. 'For all I know, Ann Traylor may have her own battle to fight.'

'Exactly,' the girl said with unsentimental briskness. 'As I see it, Mother is fighting her own battle.'

'If she is, dear, she is doing it for all of us.'

'That,' the girl said pertly, 'I will have to see. Good night.'

'Good night, Meg. Do look in on Mary if thou wilt. If she is still awake, I promised her I'd tell her a story.'

'Don't worry,' the girl said. 'I'll tell her one myself.' She opened the door and hesitated as if to say more. Henrietta braced herself, but, mercifully, she thought better of it, closed the door and was gone.

The nightingale sang exultantly in the garden, enamoured of the night. Or of its own sound? What substance was there to the sermon she had given the child, other than the need to vent her own emotions, just as the nightingale was doing?

She rose and leaned against the window post, gazing at the darkening garden. The letter had been sent eight days ago. That meant the little boy in chains was to be hanged tomorrow. She wondered whether they had the same barbaric custom here as in France of serving those they were about to kill a three-course meal, with wine and liqueur; whether they would use the trap or push him off a tripod. How could a man live with himself after hanging a child? How could he face his own children afterwards? For all she knew, the men who had killed her own children had gone back to their families without feeling shame or guilt, for they had done it not as men, but as soldiers. God, she should stop this.

She took a deep breath of the evening air. Come, think of something else. Think of the girl. She had sounded brutal and insensitive; other daughters would have admired their mother and her noble efforts, all she could think about, the silly goose, was what her rival Ann Traylor was doing.

As a matter of face, what *was* Ann doing? There was little mention of her in the letter. '*Ann and my husband are faithfully trying to cope with the constant stream of requests that emanates from this dungeon.*'

Suddenly some duenna's instinct smelled a rat. A lonely, middle-aged man, a restless, passionate girl . . .

'*Voyons! Tout de même!*' She closed the window, shutting out the nightingale. She would never be a Quaker.

CHAPTER FIVE

'SING,' the boy whispered in the darkness.

'But that will wake up the others.'

'Sing softly.'

She sang softly, the way she now did every night. They had been lying like this, side by side in the darkness on her narrow cot with his head on her shoulder, every night for weeks. As she sang the slow melody of 'The Andalusian Merchant', she hoped he would fall asleep; he usually did. But as she reached the end she braced herself for the questions: 'Will it hurt?' 'Will I go to heaven?'

She had expected those questions a long time ago; it was unnatural that he had not referred with a word to what was to happen on the morrow, as if he were not even aware of it. He must be thinking about it; he was an intelligent boy, aware of everything that went on around him. It was unbelievable that he could simply ignore it, behaving as if he had a whole life ahead of him which they would spend in each other's company. That was what bothered her most: the passionate, desperate way in which, since that walk on the walls, he now clung to her.

She waited for the first question, dreading it and at the same time yearning to broach the subject at last. They could not live through these last hours without referring to it at all. She had decided she would not talk about Jesus waiting for him, but someone he had known, someone he had loved. Surely there must be someone. Then she would ask him to prepare a place for her, to wait for her to join him, so as to take away some of his terror of the dark, of oblivion. But he was sound asleep again, relaxed and at peace. Did he not realise that in a few hours' time . . .?

Even now she could not bring herself to confront the gruesome thing about to be done to him. The moment she felt that horror encroaching upon her she thought of the miracle God would perform through her, the power He would grant her to stop this evil. She forced herself to think: 'Have faith, believe, believe in Him, *believe*!' What she should do, she told herself, was sleep, gather strength for the ordeal ahead, were it only to bridge the hours that separated her from the moment when . . . Oh, my God!

Suddenly she was overcome by a sorrow so deep, so overwhelming that she knew it would paralyse her if she gave in to it. It seemed as though a mound of grief had been building up behind her and was about to crush her. She must not give in to it! She must not fail him!

She should not stay like this, staring in the darkness, his head on her shoulder, his small body pressed against hers; she should get up and move about, kneel, pray, for God's sake, pray! She tried to disengage herself without waking him up, but he gripped her tightly; a few minutes later she tried again, and this time he let her go. Cautiously she slid out of his small embrace and rose. The darkness was so deep that she could not see the outline of the cot; but she knew the small world in which she lived by now. She found by touch the edge of the screen, crossed the emptiness beyond with her hands outstretched until she felt the bars and pulled herself against them. 'God,' she prayed, 'God, have mercy, God, give me strength, God, God, have mercy, for Jesus' sake, have mercy on him, have mercy, mercy . . .' She was startled by a sudden whisper. 'Ma'am?'

It came from the passage, close by; whoever it was must have found his way in the dark.

'Who is it?'

'Hush! It's me, the jailer who carried him down from the wall, remember?'

'Oh — oh, yes . . . What is it you want?'

'Hush,' the voice urged, closer. 'I've come to give you this.'

'What?'

'Where's your hand? Put it through the bars.'

She obeyed; something cold touched her fingers.

'Have you got it? Take it, it's a bottle.'

She took it. 'What is it for?' she breathed.

'Give that to him in the morning, ma'am, after they bring his breakfast. When Mistress Fraley ask what he wants to drink, say lemonade, and when no one is looking pour this into it.'

'Why? What is it?'

'Hush! It will make him drowsy, ma'am, so he won't really know what's going on.'

'Oh . . . Are you sure that — '

The voice did not let her finish. 'Yes, ma'am, yes!' it whispered urgently. 'You give it to him! It's a great help, especially for children. But don't let anyone see it, don't tell anyone I gave it to you. It would go badly for me if they knew.'

'Thank you,' she said, trying to keep her voice calm and controlled. 'Thank you very much. How very kind of you.'

'There's one more thing, ma'am,' the voice continued after a pause, as if he had been looking to see if someone were coming. 'When Carter Barton comes to weigh the boy, take him aside and ask him to make it the long drop . . . Did you hear that, ma'am? The long drop.'

'Y-yes,' she whispered.

'It's important, ma'am, very important. Make sure you do.'

'What is it?' She could not help herself, she had to ask.

'Never mind, ma'am, Carter will know what you mean. Just ask him to give the boy the long drop, he'll do it.'

'But — but what *is* it?'

'Hush, ma'am, hush!' There was another silence; then the voice whispered, 'Good luck.'

'Thank . . . thank you.'

She stood, the little bottle in her hand, her head against the bars. She tried to pray, to revive her certainty that she would save him through the power of the Lord, the way George had saved the girl in Derby. But she could not think coherently, she could only feel an inexpressible sorrow, not just for Henry, for all of them. God, she prayed, God, mercy, mercy . . .

But it was as if the only love in the universe she could call upon was her own, a faltering candle flame among the stars.

* * *

Justice John Sawrey did not sleep all night. He stayed up till the small hours preparing a document for Margaret Fell to sign; by the time he went to bed it was too late. He just lay there waiting for the dawn.

At first light he went to the window to see what sort of day it was going to be. The night before, Holly Stowe, whose gout forecast the weather, had announced there would be rain in the morning; to his relief, he saw the stars bright in the sky. He expected a large crowd; the crime had been notorious and the hanging of a child always attracted more people than other executions.

He lit the candle and dressed for the occasion. The prescribed garb for the sentencing judge was black hat with black plume, black cloak, black gloves, no ruffs or cuffs, black satin collar and turnovers. It was an uncomfortable costume and he would have preferred to put it on at the last moment, but he could not count

on finding the opportunity to do so. Many magistrates and dignitaries were expected with their families; he should be on hand to welcome them and make sure they were given seats in the tribune according to their prominence. The common people would stand in the courtyard, early arrivals getting the best places.

When he looked out he heard the murmur of the waiting crowd; the first spectators had already gathered outside the gateway the night before. By the time the boy appeared on the scaffold, people would be packed in that courtyard as tightly as herrings in a cask, even in the gateway.

When the constable came to call him, he was fully dressed. 'I suggest thou and Holly go down and ask the warden whether he can use your help. The gates will be opened any moment now.'

'Holly is sick,' the constable said. 'His foot hurts something terrible. He has been moaning all night.'

'In that case, leave him here. But do offer thyself to the warden. I want thee to keep an eye open for anyone from Ulverstone. I want to know who they are, understood?'

The constable grunted.

With the aid of a candle, John Sawrey descended the narrow stairway to the corridor leading to the warden's office. When he opened the door he found the prison officials already present, despite the early hour. Both Farragut and the hunchback were there with their turnkeys, all of them dressed in black, Farragut wearing the red seal of his rank. Dr. Withers was lowering his surplice over his head when Sawrey came in; he went on talking inside the garment while the others bowed respectfully, the hunchback sweeping his hat.

'Mumble mumble mumble,' Dr. Withers muttered, 'I feel we should, for this hour is inconducive to . . .' His head appeared, white-haired and noble; alerted by the respectful silence, he saw who had joined them. 'Ah, good morning!' he croaked, shrugging down the surplice with a feminine wriggle of his hips. 'As I was saying, why must we have these executions at such an inconvenient hour? Is there any particular reason why they must be at dawn?'

'I always thought it had something to do with religion,' Sawrey remarked coolly.

'Oh? I'm only a simple priest, but if the reason for this ungodly hour were divinely inspired, I would know about it, wouldn't I? Personally, I find —'

'When are the gates to be opened?' Sawrey asked, ignoring him.

'At the usual time, one hour before,' the warden replied.

'As we are expecting a large crowd, would it not be wise to make it earlier?'

'As you wish, Your Honour. But we should wait until Carter Barton is through with his preparations.'

'Has he arrived yet?'

'He is checking the gallows now. He has been here for some time.'

'As have most of us, if I may say so!' Dr. Withers interjected. 'For these infernal hangings a man has to be up at midnight! At least I have, if I want to prepare the soul of my prisoner properly.'

'I'll have a word with him,' Sawrey said, going to the door.

'Wait a minute! Are you going down? I'm coming with you!' Dr. Withers hitched up his skirts.

'I'd rather you did not,' Sawrey answered. 'I wish to have a word with Mistress Fell before you all start crowding about down there. Pray, give me at least a quarter of an hour.'

'But what about my preparing the boy's soul?' Withers cried 'Should we not be concerned with that, rather than fritter —'

'You have had a month in which to prepare his soul, sir; if you haven't done so by now, one quarter of an hour is not going to make much difference.'

Sawrey opened the door and entered the dark gateway. The crowd beyond the gates fell silent at his appearance; he ignored them and went to the courtyard, his steps echoing in the vault. The platform of the scaffold and the gibbet were outlined in the sky, where dawn had begun: a blue, translucent brightening of the darkness. As he looked up at the black rectangle of the scaffold, a square suddenly sprang open in it and with a rumble and a creaking jerk something heavy plummeted through and dangled, swinging, from a rope reaching into the sky. He climbed the ladder irritably. 'Next time, give warning before dropping that sandbag!' he cried to the silhouette at the foot of the gallows. 'I was nearly knocked over!'

'Beg pardon. Your Honour,' the mournful voice of the executioner answered. 'It's the short drop; the bag is nearly ten feet off the ground.'

'How was I to know?' Sawrey asked peevishly, crawling on to the platform. Of course the man was right. 'And don't add any

weights!' When there was a large crowd it was always best to give them their money's worth. For the execution to be over in a flash would be bad policy, people would feel deprived of something, especially Mistress Jones. But there were others who would disguise their ghoulish disappointment as righteous indignation if the boy failed to struggle for at least five minutes before giving up the ghost.

'Don't worry, Your Honour, I'll see it's done right,' the shadow replied mournfully.

'I know thou wilt, I'm counting on thee.' Carter Barton was, despite his bovine bulk, an executioner of subtlety; he could calculate the death struggle of his victim down to a few seconds. 'Hast thou weighed the boy yet?'

'Not yet, Your Honour. I was just about to go down. The carpenter is waiting.'

'Ah? I haven't seen him.'

'He's somewhere under here. You must have missed him in the dark.'

'Listen, Carter: I must have a word with Mistress Fell before anyone else turns up, I want to make sure she understands what's happening so there shall be no hitches. Give me a few minutes before turning up; I am going down now.'

'Very good, Your Honour.'

'And remember, I count on thee. An example, that's what we need.'

'Don't fret. Your Honour. I'll see to it.'

'Very good, Carter. Thou art a good man; thy work will be properly rewarded. The widow of the boy's victim is going to be there. I am sure she will not fail to express her appreciation.'

The giant must have arrived at the same conclusion himself, or he would not have been here this early. It was customary for the next of kin of the victim to reward the executioner for the emotional satisfaction he was able to give them. A good hangman could achieve different effects by the type of noose, the length of rope, the weights attached to the legs. Some executioners were sentimental when it came to children; they made the rope so long and weighted the little body so heavily that the head was severed by the drop. In Carter Barton's case there was no need for worry; the man had the insensitivity of an ox.

When Sawrey's silhouette appeared in the gateway again, the crowd at the other end fell silent once more and watched him as he made his way to the door of the dungeons. They knew there

was nothing happening yet, but after a long night of inactivity his mere appearance represented the beginning of the excitement. The guard at the doorway saluted him; he too was garbed for the occasion, in his case a black hood with two slits for eyes and a black capulet that reached halfway down his chest. Traditionally, the guard at the door followed immediately behind the prisoner, to prod him with a halberd should he stumble on his way up.

'Is Mistress Fraley down there yet?'

'I haven't seen her, Your Honour, I've just come on.'

'If she happens by, tell her to wait until I'm finished down there. I will call her.'

'Very good, Your Honour.' Respectfully, the man opened the door for him and handed him a lantern. 'You'll need that on your way down, sir.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

The stench, when he stepped inside, was stifling, and he felt the tension even as he entered; on the day of a hanging the excitement of the unseen felons in their cages was always tangible. It sent a prickly feeling down his spine; he started down, wondering what would be his fate if someone, in a moment like this, were to open all doors and let them out. He was sure that they would tear him apart, rip out his heart and eat it, as had been reported on one occasion in Brixton prison in London. Suddenly, with an ear-splitting squeal, a black thing carrying a human figure came plummeting down from above and streaked past, nearly knocking him off his feet with the turbulence it caused in the stagnant air. It was Mistress Fraley's cart; she must already have been inside when the guard came on duty. He hurried down to catch her before she started pushing the cart down the corridor where the lunatics were screaming and banging.

'Oh, Your Honour! You gave me quite a fright!' she cried when he tapped her shoulder.

'I'll thank thee to make thy descent more dignified next time,' he said tersely. 'On an occasion like this, it does not show the proper respect to come plummeting out of the sky like a witch on a broomstick.'

'Oh — very good, Your Honour.'

'Pray do not intrude for the next ten minutes.' Without waiting for her reply, he turned away and entered the corridor. The crazy women went berserk at the sight of him; they shrieked and spat, slamming their chains against the bars in demented fury.

He did not deign to look at them, but stayed well out of reach of their grasping claws as he passed. Their frenzied rage expressed the mood of the prison; as he approached the children's cell, he could almost feel the hatred swirl around him.

The moment he appeared at the gate, Margaret Fell came wading towards him through the straw to open the door. The gate swung inward, the screeching of its hinges inaudible because of the deafening din of the madwomen next door. 'Oh, Mr. Sawrey, good morning! How kind of you to be so early!' She shouted it, almost gaily.

It would have been a bewildering welcome, had he not spent all this time on the study of the Quaker mentality. Her mind no longer had any secrets from him; after identifying with her through endless pages of clerical prose, he knew the exact meaning of every gesture, every word. His plan had worked to perfection; she would not be so calm and serene unless she were absolutely convinced that there would be no execution because God would prevent the hanging of the small, stoop-shouldered boy who sat crouched on the edge of the field bed, watching him anxiously with his one, unblinking eye.

After a glance at the boy, she asked in a whisper, 'Mr. Sawrey, would it be possible for me to come with him?'

'Of course. That can be arranged.'

'You're so kind.'

'Don't mention it, Madam; it's the smallest of favours. I am not sure I can allow you to mount the scaffold itself, though. That, I'm afraid, is the prerogative of his spiritual adviser.'

'Oh — but surely Dr. Withers is not his spiritual adviser. He has barely seen the child.'

'I know, Madam. But, alas . . .'

'Can I not be his spiritual adviser?'

He did not betray that this was what he had intended her to ask. 'I'm afraid that only a priest can be considered as such, Madam.'

She hesitated, then she said, with a nervous smile, 'Well, Mr. Sawrey, I know this has been a point of interest to you for some time; the moment has come to tell you that I am a priest, according to my religious beliefs.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Come, Mr. Sawrey, we do not have time for niceties! You know I am a Quaker, and I suspect that you know enough about

Quakers by now to realise that to us every member is a minister. On that basis I now request that I stay with Henry to the end.'

'You realise, Madam, that this will have to be acknowledged officially?' he asked quietly.

'How do you mean?'

'I cannot grant permission as a personal favour; the occasion is a public one. I cannot do so unless I am presented with a document stating that you, Margaret Fell, spouse of Chief Justice Fell of Swarthmoor Hall in the Parish of Ulverston, solemnly declare in the presence of sworn witnesses that you are a member of the religious sect known as the Children of the Light, commonly called Quakers, and consider yourself to be a minister of said religious movement, duly accredited. It must also state that the prisoner Henry Jones is a member in good standing of said religious movement, and that he has expressed the desire that a minister of his faith shall assist him in his last moments for the sake of his soul.'

Her eyes searched his. 'Do you by any chance have the document with you?'

He felt a quiver of excitement that he suppressed at once. He reached inside his sleeve and produced the small roll of parchment he had prepared overnight. 'It will need your signature in the place I have indicated. Read it at your ease and hand it to Dr. Withers when he comes; I'll take care of the witnesses' signatures.'

She took the parchment; he noticed that her hand shook, she must realise fully the consequences of signing this document. It was a moment towards which he had worked with total dedication for a long time; perhaps that was why it came as an anticlimax.

'Let me give you a quick summary of this morning's procedure as from now,' he said.

She put her hand on his arm. It was an oddly gentle gesture at that particular moment. 'Don't, Mr. Sawrey. I know it all.'

'You know that Master Barton and the carpenter will be turning up in a moment or so? That a special meal will be served by Mistress Fraley?'

'Yes, I — I do know it all.' For the first time she betrayed a strain. Her face looked haggard and deeply lined. No wonder: she was about to put an end to herself by trying to obstruct the execution. It was essential that she should do so in plain view of everyone in the courtyard. 'I need not warn you, Madam,' he

said, 'that any interference with the proceedings on your part would constitute an obstruction of justice, which is a felony.'

She had been about to turn away; his words stopped her. 'I know,' she said, with a smile. She was, despite her delusion, an admirable woman.

With a clatter of wheels, accompanied by the shrieks of the lunatics, Mistress Fraley and her cart drew near too soon.

'Madam, I wish you Godspeed,' he said, bowing. He gave Mistress Fraley a mortifying look; as he walked away, he overheard, despite the screaming of the wretches in the adjoining cell, the old harridan's question. 'What'll he drink? Beer? Porter? Cider?' and Margaret Fell's answer, 'No, thank you, Mistress Fraley. He'll have lemonade.' She said it as if she were placing an order in a tavern; he could not help marvelling at her fortitude.

* * *

The meal Mistress Fraley brought for Henry was unlike any meal Margaret had ever been served in prison. There were scrambled eggs and sausages and kippers and oat cakes, tartlets and scones and strawberry preserves and a dish full of butter. There was far too much for one person, let alone a small boy; but she received it with gratitude and complimented the housekeeper on her care. When Mistress Fraley had left, Margaret asked Henry, 'Well, love, which of this wouldst thou like first?'

He swallowed, looked at the array of dishes, the delicacies spread out for him, and shook his head.

She felt herself weaken, but closed her eyes for a moment and thought, 'Hold on, hold on!' She smiled and asked, 'Are thou sure? Look at these sausages. Don't they look tasty? Jody! Take thy hand away!' The other children crowded around the glorious treats and could, of course, hardly resist helping themselves, but she had to make sure first that Henry wanted none of it. 'Thou art sure, love?' she insisted.

He gave her a look that made her flinch inwardly. She patted his shoulder and said, 'Very well. Shall we give it to the others?'

He nodded quickly.

'All right, children. Let's start with the cakes ... Robert ... Harry . No, Jody! Don't touch before I give it to thee!' She always forgot the child could not hear; she pushed the grabbing little hand away.

The sharing out of the meal among the others gave her a brief respite from the decision, over which she had agonised all night, whether to give Henry the potion from the jailer. She was still trying to make up her mind when, unexpectedly because of the noise of the children, she discovered two men standing at the gate. One was huge and sinister, dressed in a black tight-fitting suit and a hood that covered his shoulders, the other was small and elderly, in ordinary labourer's clothes. 'Yes?' she asked shakily; she thought for a moment that they had already come to fetch him.

'We have come to have a look at the boy, ma'am,' the huge man said. His voice was slow and mournful.

'Oh — I see . . . Are you Mr. Barton?'

'Yes, ma'am. And this is Saul MacDougal, the carpenter. Would you let us in, pray?'

'Oh — oh, certainly.' She fumbled for her key, tearing a button off her dress in her haste to take it out. She tried to insert the key into the lock through the bars, but her hand shook so that she could not find the keyhole. The carpenter took it from her and opened the lock. The hinges screeched; the huge man stooped as he entered. 'We won't take a moment ma'am,' he said. 'Is this the boy?'

All she could do was nod. She watched, hands tightly folded, as the big man went to Henry, touched his shoulder and said, 'Just stand up for a moment, laddie. I'm not going to do anything, just stand up for a moment.'

Henry obeyed fearfully; suddenly the man stooped, picked him up in his arms and lifted him off the ground. She cried, 'No!' and dashed forward, but the man put him down again.

'It's all right, ma'am,' he said. 'I just wanted to find out how much he weighed.'

'Oh, God . . .!' She knew she should be brave and calm and not show any emotion, but it was impossible. She put her arms around Henry and pressed him against her; he hid his face against her chest. As they stood there, stricken with horror, the carpenter approached, took a length of twine out of his pocket and measured Henry with it, behind his back, and tied a knot in the twine. 'That's all, ma'am,' he said. 'You go and eat, there's plenty of time yet.'

The men turned to go; she cried, 'Mr. Barton!'

He stood still and turned around. 'Yes, ma'am?'

'Could I . . . could I have a word with you? In private . . .'

The man frowned, his dull eyes looked at her uncomprehendingly.

'Come, Henry, come, my dear; just sit here for a moment, I'll be back at once.' She sat the child down on the bed; then she turned to the carpenter. 'Mr. MacDougal — would you mind? Just one moment, while I speak with Mr. Barton?'

'Yes, ma'am,' the carpenter said. 'I'll be just outside, Carter.'

When he had gone, she took the big man's arm to guide him as far away from Henry as possible. His arm felt huge and alien, like part of some large animal. When they stood by the wall, close together, she looked up at him and whispered, 'Mr. Barton, in the name of God, I pray you . . .' She could not help it, tears were running down her face.

'Yes, ma'am?'

Go for that of God in him, she thought, for for that of God. 'Mr. Carter, Friend,' she whispered, 'I have a great service to ask thee, not for myself but for — for Christ's sake. Give Henry the — the long drop, please.' Although she could only guess at the meaning of the words, she had barely been able to bring them out. She was overcome with despair; like her acceptance of the potion, it seemed a surrender.

He took a long time to answer. She realised that he was of two minds; she pleaded, whispering, 'Friend Carter, I pray thee, he is so little, so afraid . . .' Suddenly she could not hold up any longer. She slumped forward, her head against the chest of the stranger, and wept as she felt all her firmness and certainty dissolve within her. Then a hand touched her shoulder and the mournful voice grumbled, 'Very well, ma'am. I'll see to it. Bear up now, ma'am. It's best to be jolly. It helps them, you know.'

'Yes — yes, Mr. Carter, Friend, yes . . .'

She managed to detach herself from him and groped for her kerchief in her apron. She wiped her eyes, saying, 'Well, that's very nice. That is very nice of you, Mr. Carter, sir. We are obliged. See you anon . . .' It was idiotic babble, a frantic effort to undo the harm she had done in letting Henry see her weep.

'That's all right, ma'am,' the mournful voice grumbled. 'Take it easy now, there's plenty of time. Goodbye, laddie.'

' 'Bye, sir . . .' Henry's voice was high and tight. He sat, shoulders hunched, knees together, on the edge of the bed.

The carpenter locked the gate and handed her the key. She said with forced gaiety, 'Goodbye, gentlemen! Goodbye, and thank you!' She watched them until they were out of sight, then

she turned around, knowing she must be calm now, and jolly. But she could not help herself, she rushed to fetch the pitcher of lemonade. To her horror, she found it empty. 'Who has taken this? Who of you has taken this?' she cried, her voice shrill.

The children froze, she had never spoken to them like this before. They gaped at her, mouths full, tartlets and sausages in their hands.

Robert, the oldest, murmured, 'She got it,' nodding at Jody. The little deaf-mute sat, oblivious of what had happened, happily drinking from the beaker. Margaret dashed for it, crying, 'Give here!' but managed to control herself and not to tear the beaker from the child's grasp. Poor mite. she could not know. 'Jody, this is Henry's,' she said slowly and clearly, kissed the child's forehead and gently took the half-empty beaker away. She went to the shelf where she had hidden the bottle and poured its contents into the rest of the lemonade. She had nothing to stir it with, so she used her finger as she took it to Henry, who was watching her anxiously. 'Here, sweeting, here, this is for thee.'

He shook his head.

'Henry, please! Please drink it! Believe me, thou *must* drink it, thou *must*, please!'

He watched her tensely, his eye was full of fear and understanding.

'Do it for me,' she whispered. He looked at the beaker, and took it. Holding her breath, her hand on her chest, she watched him as he drank; when he had finished, she closed her eyes and felt herself sway on her feet. Be jolly, be jolly! She smiled at him through her tears and asked, 'Well? How did that taste?' It was a foolish question her voice sounded shrill and unnatural.

He looked at her calmly, with an expression on his face that chilled her. 'God,' she thought, 'God, mercy.' Then, suddenly calm and firm, she said, 'Come, let's thou and I have meeting, shall we? We need a moment with God.' She knelt by the side of the cot, her back to the others, folded her hands, closed her eyes and bent her head. After a moment she felt him get up and kneel beside her. 'God,' she thought, at the end of her strength, 'help us, help us, we are failing.'

She waited for that of God to rise within her and bless her with that indescribable feeling of peace and light. But it was as if God, if He indeed dwelt within her, was as failing in strength as she. She sat there, slowly sinking in the awareness that she had no power. She had nothing; all she could muster within herself was

powerless love, the candle flame among the stars. But that too flickered and died. She sat for a few moments in total darkness, total despair. Then something touched her hand.

It was Henry's, resting on hers. 'God,' she thought, 'mercy, mercy, for Thy Son's sake. Thy Son who died on the cross. Thy Child who cried for His Father.' And suddenly there it was, rising within her: stillness, peace, light.

But it was not from within her that the stillness rose. It was communicated to her by the small, cold hand resting on hers. Was that possible? Could it be that God had granted Henry peace? She glanced at him. He sat as she did, head bent, eyes closed; a lock of his blond hair that she had washed the night before hung down, silky and shining, on his forehead.

She wondered whether he knew, the way he had known when he had given her the flower, and she asked herself who, in the shadow of death, was sustaining the other.

* * *

When Ann Traylor came out of the inn, she found, to her relief, Thomas Fell waiting for her. The sight of his familiar figure in the pale light of dawn moved her so much that she needed all her self-control not to rush towards him and embrace him in gratitude. For she had been haunted all night by visions of the boy doomed to die at sunrise. It was not for him that she agonised but for Margaret Fell, who had spent the night with the child and who must now be suffering untold torments. She would have to go to her, stay with her and the other children while the execution took place in the courtyard; but the prospect was so harrowing that she might well have taken flight but for this dear, dear man. Her relief and gratitude were such that she greeted him with a cry, 'Thomas!' that rang through the courtyard.

He took her arm and said, 'I thought I'd come and escort thee. There's likely to be a crowd outside the gate. Thou wouldst have difficulty fighting thy way through.'

'A crowd? At this hour?'

'Oh, yes. The ghouls who come to witness this kind of thing turn up early. Come, let's go.'

They walked in silence, arm in arm, down the deserted streets towards the castle.

'I think we had better take the side entrance,' he said as they approached the sombre building. 'I have the key.'

'Can I get to the dungeons from there?'

'Art thou sure thou shouldst go down?'

'It's the least I can do. It must be terrible for her, just now. I can hardly face it myself.'

'I wonder whether thou wouldst be of much help to her at this point.'

'Why not?'

'It may be easier for her to be alone with the other children. Thy presence might make it more difficult for her to master her feelings while the execution is taking place upstairs.'

'But she won't know when it happens, will she? Surely she can't hear what goes on in the courtyard that far down?'

'Oh, yes, she'll know exactly. I don't know how they do it, but all prisoners know. Maybe it is whispered from cell to cell; maybe they hear the crowd. The well of the stairs acts as an ear to the prison. It's uncanny, but they always know exactly. Quite often they shout, curses and the lie; at the moment of execution itself, they usually go berserk.'

She dared not confide to him the horror that filled her at his description. They crossed the square; there, at the foot of the walls of the castle, was a huge mass of people, indistinct in the semi-darkness, gathered at the gate.

'There are so many of them already . . .'

'This way, if we want to avoid them.'

They lade their way, almost furtively, around the square.

'I wish thou wouldst think it over, dear Ann,' he said as they entered a dark portico in the wall. 'Believe me, it would be best to leave her be.'

'Oh, I pray thee! Don't make me feel more uncertain!'

'Forgive me.' He pressed her arm. There was a click, a door creaked. 'This way.'

She entered the twilight of a long corridor, vaguely lit by a row of windows blue with the dawn. At the far end was a crescent of yellow light; as they approached it, she realised it was a door standing ajar. It led to the warden's office, bright with the light of candles and lanterns, full of people: Warden Farragut, the hunchback Hathaway, Dr. Withers. A slight man stood with his back to the door; when he turned around, she saw Justice Sawrey.

As they entered, silence fell. Outside, the waiting crowd murmured and laughed. There was a tension in the air that gave Ann the shivers.

'Good morning,' Justice Sawrey said, smiling. 'You are just in

time, we are about to admit the crowd. May I invite you to join me on the tribune?'

Thomas replied, 'No, thank you, Sawrey. Miss Traylor would like to be with my wife during the next hour. Could she be escorted there before you open the gates?'

Sawrey exchanged a look with the warden, who said, 'Sorry, Miss Traylor, but that is not advisable under the circumstances. Why not wait until later? In an hour's time it will all be over.'

'Oh, but I must!' she exclaimed, forcefully because of the lamentable relief she felt at his refusal.

Justice Sawrey said, 'Young lady, it is the warden's decision, and I concur. The procession will be on its way in a few moments. You would not care to run into that, would you, now?'

Thomas took her arm and said, 'If Justice Sawrey feels he cannot grant permission, that is all there is to it. He is provost during Hilary, this is his responsibility. Come, let me take you to chambers.'

'You won't be able to see anything from there,' Sawrey said.

'Is it not our intention to be spectactors,' Thomas replied dryly. Without waiting for Sawrey's comment, he took her arm and guided her back into the corridor.

When they were out of earshot, she whispered, 'I feel awful! Please! Is there no other way . . .?'

'Hush.' He pressed her arm. 'Believe me, this is for the best. Thou hast no idea of the mood the prison is in right now. We'll go upstairs and wait until it is over; thou canst go to her the moment the crowd has left.'

She protested no longer. Quickly they walked down the echoing corridor.

* * *

Margaret knew they were coming because of an angry noise of many voices that started far away and steadily increased. Finally the women next door began to scream and curse and slam their chains against the bars; outside the gate a small procession of men in black appeared, led by Dr. Withers in a white surplice, carrying a prayerbook. She saw the wardens, Farragut and Hathaway, and two jailers, each carrying a halberd. The children, who until that moment had been playing in the straw oblivious of the impending horror, backed away into the corner. There they sat huddled close together, watching the men.

'Pray open up,' Dr. Withers said.

She looked at Henry; he lay asleep on the cot. She waded towards the gate, took out the key and handed it to the priest. While he was opening the gate, she went to Henry's side and put her arm protectively around his head without touching him, for she did not want to wake him up. A tremor took hold of her; she tried to fight it by praying silently, 'God, please help, God, help, please help, please help ...' She opened her eyes and saw the priest and the wardens standing at the foot of the cot.

'Is — is this ...?' she asked softly, so as not to frighten Henry. .

'I'm afraid so, ma'am.' Warden Farragut's voice was kind, but he looked ominous in his black clothes. 'I'm afraid you will have to wake him up, ma'am.'

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to draw strength from within herself, from God. Then she gently shook the boy's shoulder and called, 'Henry? Henry, wake up ... Henry, it's — it's time ...' He stirred, but he did not open his eye.

'Henry? Henry, it's — it's time ...' He could not be roused; the potion must have been stronger than she thought. Should she not have given him the whole bottle? In her anguish she looked at the two jailers with halberds, seeking reassurance from the one who had brought it to her; but in their black hoods she could not recognise who it had been.

'Has this child been drugged?' Dr. Withers asked angrily.

Suddenly she was overcome by panic; all she could do was nod.

'Mistress Fell!' the old man cried. 'Don't you know that is a punishable offence, ma'am? 'An obstruction of justice?'

'Oh, please, please, for the sake of God!' she cried, falling on her knees in front of him. In her panic, she threw her arms around his legs. She knelt there for a moment, not knowing what to do. But she must not give in! She must not give in to this weakness! She must stay with Henry, help him, be there. 'Oh, God,' she whispered. 'Help me, help me ...'

'He must be conscious for the sake of his soul!' the voice above her cried. 'If we want him to be ready for the grace of Christ's atonement, he must repent before he dies! He cannot repent if he is unconscious!'

'Oh, please, please!' she pleaded, looking up at the angry face, the inhuman eyes. 'He *has* repented, I know he has, he told me

himself, he told me only last night, he *has* repented, he is very, very sorry, can't we now just let him be?'

'I cannot administer Holy Communion if he is unable to give the proper responses!'

'It will not be necessary,' she said, 'he — I — let me show you . . .' She rose, fetched the roll of parchment from the shelf in the wall and handed it to him. 'I have asked Mr. Sawrey to allow me to be his spiritual adviser,' she said. 'It's all here in this document.'

Dr. Withers gazed into her eyes for a moment, puzzled; then he unrolled the parchment and read it. As he did so, he shook his head. Her heart sank. He rolled it up again and asked, 'Are you aware of the consequences of this document to you, personally?'

She nodded.

'May I ask what possessed you to do this?'

She had been ready to plead with him; to find herself attacked was more than she could bear. 'For God's sake!' she cried in desperation. '*Look* at him!'

The old man looked at the child asleep on the cot. For a few moments no one moved. In the distance, far away, was a murmur, as of many people.

'I cannot allow you to take my place,' he said. 'All I am prepared to do is let you share my ministry. I will do my duty by him; after the final Lord's Prayer you can do your part, whatever that may be. You will have to give the signal.'

'Signal?'

'To the hangman. When you are through, just nod at him so he knows he can go about his business.'

She stared at him, aghast. 'I cannot! I . . .' Then she remembered that it would not be necessary. By then she would have cried out, that of God in her would have fused with — with that of God in — in . . . She was overcome by giddiness. She closed her eyes and thought, 'God, please! Please, God, keep me going, please, please . . .'

'Well, let's get him on his feet and on his way,' she heard Dr. Withers say. A hand touched her shoulder; it was Warden Farragut. 'Would you waken him, ma'am?' he asked; there was kindness in his eyes. Dr. Withers had turned away, she saw him stoop through the gate.

'Must I?' she whispered.

'Pardon?'

'Must we wake him up? I'll carry him! He is very light . . .

Warden Farragut looked at her, then he asked, 'Why don't you stay down here with the children, ma'am? It would be much better for everyone.'

'Oh, please, please!' Panic overwhelmed her again. 'Please don't make me do that! I'll — I'll wake him.'

'She bent over the boy, but the warden held her back. 'Let me do that, ma'am.' He bent over Henry; she stood by, eyes closed, not wanting to see; then the warden's voice said, 'Here he is ma'am.'

She opened her eyes. There was Henry, asleep in the warden's arms; he was holding him for her to take over. 'Oh, thank you! Thank you, Mr. Farragut!' she whispered. She took the slight, sleeping body in her arms, put its head on her shoulder and whispered, 'All's well, all's well, it's me . . .' Then she looked at the warden and nodded.

He touched his hat and went out the gate. She followed him; the chain, dangling from the ankles of the sleeping child, clanked against her as she walked.

In the gate she turned around and said to the children huddled in the corner, as cheerfully as she could, 'Now be good, children! I won't be long, I —' Their faces were so knowing that she turned away.

Outside, the procession had formed again, led by Dr. Withers. Between Warden Farragut and Warden Hathaway was a space; she understood it was meant for her. She joined them; they started to move. The moment they did so, Dr. Withers began to read from his Bible, '*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .*'

The sound of his voice was drowned by the cries of the lunatic women as they passed. 'Good-bye!' they shouted. 'Good-bye, Henry! Good-bye!'

Their cries were so loud that she was certain he would wake up, but he did not stir. He was getting heavier; she wondered whether her strength would reach all the way up those steps. Again she prayed for help; but she had done it so often that morning that her plea began to lose conviction. She must concentrate on the power of the Lord now, so she would be able to muster it when the moment came. She knew she would; George had done it, she would be able to do it too.

The cries of the lunatics receded as they continued down the passage towards the landing. When they arrived there, Dr.

Withers' chanting voice was drowned again, this time by a sudden, huge sound of many voices crying, 'Good-bye! Good-bye!' It came from the passages; never had they sounded so near.

She stumbled on the first step; behind her, Warden Farragut asked in a whisper, 'Ma'am, shall I carry him?'

'No, no, Mr. Farragut,' she replied, 'I can manage.'

As she hoisted herself on to the next step, Henry suddenly seemed to become lighter. It took her a moment to realise that Warden Hathaway, in front of her, had picked up the chain.

Slowly the procession mounted the stairs. When they reached the second landing, a new chorus of voices joined the unseen prisoners' cries of farewell. 'Good-bye, Henry! Good-bye! Good-bye!'

Concentrating on carrying the child, she continued to climb the steps to the courtyard.

* * *

'What is that—' Ann Traylor asked. She was standing at the window of the judges' chambers. The hubbub of the crowd in the courtyard had suddenly ceased and a subterranean murmur become audible, that seemed to be drawing closer.

'Those are the other prisoners, saying farewell,' Thomas Fell beside her replied. 'They always do. It means the boy is on his way.'

From where they stood they could not see the scaffold, but he knew from experience that the sounds would be explicit enough. As the farewell of the voices from the dungeons, projected by the well of the stairs, grew in volume, he was overcome by the emotion that always beset him during the last minutes before an execution, a mixture of melancholy and carnal excitement. It was not obscene; it was caused by a sudden awareness of his own evanescence; touched by the shadow of death, his flesh responded with a feverish lust for life. Had he remembered this, he would not have suggested that they wait here, for now the lust for life concentrated on the girl by his side.

'Oh, my God,' she whispered, as the sound grew louder until it seemed to reverberate in the courtyard. 'I don't know if I can stand this . . .'

He put his arm around her shoulders protectively. 'If thou wilt, we'll close the window. But I believe it best if we do not.' He tried to mask with solicitousness his urge to feel her soft, young body against him.

The sacrificial lamb was about to emerge into the open; the crowd began to growl in anticipation. He felt her shiver when suddenly there came from below a terrifying roar.

'Here they come,' he said.

* * *

When Margaret Fell stepped out into the courtyard, she was, for a moment, confused. The procession was greeted by hundreds of jerring, catcalling voices that seemed to come from all directions; the gateway was packed with people. The wall of shouting faces, distorted with hatred, unnerved her; the determination that had sustained her until that moment dropped away; suddenly she knew: I cannot do it, I cannot live through this. As if he sensed her faltering, Warden Farragut sustained her. His face seemed to be the only human face in this nightmare of distorted, screaming masks. When the crowd in the courtyard saw them, the shouts and screams increased. She arrived at the bottom of a ladder, looked up and saw a platform where a ghastly gibbet waited.

Mr. Barton climbed the ladder, then Dr. Winters; when her turn came, she knew she could never do it alone, so she let Mr. Farragut take Henry. She climbed the ladder first, awkwardly because of her skirts; when she was halfway, Mr Barton's head and shoulders appeared in the sky, and he stretched out a hand towards her. He pulled her on to the scaffold; she looked over the edge and saw Mr. Farragut climbing towards her, Henry on his shoulder. She knelt to receive him and was helped back on to her feet by Mr. Barton, who guided her to a spot underneath the gibbet.

The screams, curses, howls of hatred from the crowd filled her with terror. They were incomprehensible to her; it was as if she were surrounded by another species. Under the onslaught of their rage the men on the scaffold seemed like friends: Mr. Barton, Dr. Withers, the two wardens, the halberdiers. She looked from one to the other pleadingly as the shrieks and the howls increased; one raucous hoarse voice nearby went on bawling monotonously, 'Let him dance, Barton! Let him dance, Barton! Let him dance, Barton!'

'He will have to kneel now, ma'am,' a voice said in her ear. It was Mr. Barton.

'He can't!' she cried. 'For God's sake, Mr. Barton, he can't!' Then the boy in her arms stirred. He lifted his head and looked around him, his arm around her neck. She knelt down to put

him on his feet; a black-gloved hand came to her aid, lifting the chain so he would not step on it and stumble; it was Warden Hathaway.

The moment the child stood on his feet, the crowd shrieked and booed with redoubled fury. Dr. Withers' voice intoned solemnly, 'Henry Jones, I am here to serve thee Holy Communion, so thou mayest partake in the blood and the body of Christ, who died for thee on the cross to grant thee now, in thy last moments, peace and the certainty of life eternal.'

She whispered, "All's well, Henry, all's well, love; kneel, love, kneel, all's well, Christ is with thee.'

She said it without thinking, but when Henry knelt and she put her arm around his shoulders, it was as if indeed they had been joined by a mysterious Presence. It seemed to fill her with an inexpressible tenderness, even towards the howling animals in the courtyard. She was filled with hope, until she realised that the tenderness totally disarmed her; she could not possibly rise in the power of the Lord and cry 'Stop!'

'God,' she prayed, as Henry sipped the wine that was Christ's blood, 'God, save him, save him . . .'

The voice of Dr. Withers intoned, 'Let us pray! *Our Father, which art in heaven . . .*'

The crowd fell silent.

* * *

'What is happening?' Ann asked, startled by the silence. It seemed more ominous than the howling of the crowd had been.

'The priest has started the Lord's Prayer,' Thomas replied. 'Look, some people down there are praying with him. Grotesque, isn't it? One moment they scream, "Let him dance," the next they mumble, "even as we forgive those that trespass against us".'

'And after this . . .?'

'The boy's chains will be removed, to make him lighter. He will be asked if he has a last wish before meeting the eternal God. Then the game begins.'

'Game?'

'I'm afraid it's going to be a long-drawn-out business.'

'I thought it was all over very quickly!'

'I'm afraid not. There are many variations possible, and in this instance . . .'

Some unspeakable evil seemed to reach out to her from the mass of people below, waiting to see a child tortured to death. It

seemed to give a sudden humanity to her sinful love for the man beside her. Suddenly she felt an overwhelming need for his sheltering arms. 'Thomas,' she whispered, 'I . . . I think I'm going to faint . . .' It was the only way; he would never have taken the lead.

She swayed on her feet, and it was not all make-believe. She heard him say, 'Ann . . . Ann!'

There were his arms. Outside the window, the crowd resumed its howling.

* * *

When the hangman put the noose over Henry's head, Margaret Fell's strength gave out. This should have been the moment for her to unleash the power of the Lord, but though she opened her mouth, her voice failed her. Her last strength dissolved when she saw Mr. Barton, after arranging the rope around Henry's neck, pat him on the shoulder.

Until that moment all her actions had been based on the assumption that she would stop the execution by submitting herself to God's power. Once again, she tried to do so in desperation, as Henry stood tethered by the neck to the gibbet above him. 'God!' she thought, with all her might, all her soul, 'God! Use me! Use me!'

What arose from the deepest resources of her soul was that indiscriminate tenderness, which squandered itself by reaching out to everybody: the wardens, the halberdiers, Dr. Withers, Mr. Barton, the howling crowd. Once more she tried to cry, '*Stop! In the name of God!*' but again her voice failed her. She thought despairingly, 'Take *me*, God, take *me*, take *me*, take *me* instead, take *me*, please, please take *me* . . .' The indiscriminate tenderness went flowing out from her to the people in the courtyard, rendering her powerless.

'Henry Jones,' Dr. Withers intoned over the roar of the crowd. 'Before thou goest to meet the Eternal God, hast thou a last wish to impart to me, thy shepherd?'

The tumult died down for a moment; voices cried: 'Last wish! Let's hear his last wish!'

'God!' she thought, collapsing on her knees beside the child, her face in her hands, 'Christ, Jesus, mercy! Mercy . . .!'

The voice of Dr. Withers asked, 'What was that thee said, Henry?'

Henry's small voice replied softly, 'Sing it.'

Her heart stopped. No, not this . . .

'Sing what, Henry?' Dr. Withers asked.

She found the strength to say, 'I know what he means. He wants me to sing for him.'

The courtyard became silent; everyone was straining to hear what was being said on the scaffold, but she did not notice it; she was conscious only of the priest. She asked, 'May I?'

Dr. Withers nodded.

She had failed as an instrument of God; she must not fail this dying child. She took a deep breath and sang, '*The Andalusian Merchant that returns . . .*' Her voice, high and tremulous, caused the hush in the courtyard to deepen. '*Laden with cochineal and chi-china—dish . . .*' Her throat contracted; she was unable to utter another sound; her hands were folded in speechless supplication.

Suddenly a voice sang far away, '*Reports in Spain how fiercely Fogo burns.*' It was a voice from the dungeons. Other voices joined in from the depths, '*In an ocean full of flying fishes. These things are wondrous . . .*'

As the sound of the singing voices grew, she seemed to be filled with light. Something immense, inexpressible revealed itself to her with overwhelming reality.

'*Yet more wondrous I,*' the voices sang from the deep, '*whose heart with fear doth freeze, with love doth fry . . .*'

Someone in the courtyard cried, 'Barton! Now!'

There was a crash as of a door slamming, a rush of wind. She opened her eyes and saw she was kneeling beside a hole in the floor, in which swung a perpendicular rope. Her heart cried out in unbearable sorrow, but the Light raised her to her feet. She stretched out her arms towards the sky. 'Henry . . .' It was as if she were reaching him up to God.

So real was the Presence as she stood there, arms stretched out towards the sky, that everyone in the courtyard stood motionless. Even in the gateway and on the square no one stirred, except the starlings.

* * *

On the tribune, Justice John Sawrey sat thunderstruck. It was incredible; somehow the woman had managed to change the bloodthirsty crowd around the gallows into a Quaker meeting. He himself was unable to shake the spell until she lowered her arms, turned to the hangman, shook him by the hand, then did

the same to Dr. Withers. He knew the meaning of that handshake: she had broken meeting.

As the crowd, with a murmur of voices, awoke from her witchery, Sawrey made his way to the scaffold. It had all gone so quickly that he had not realised exactly what was happening; one moment the boy had been kneeling on the hatch, the next he was gone, as if swallowed up by the shadows under the scaffold.

He knew what had happened when he saw the remains. The boy had been deliberately, expertly, beheaded. Dr. Withers came down the ladder and joined him, to his astonishment, to give him back the roll of parchment. 'I have no use for this, Sawrey. I'll leave it to you to dispose of it.'

'No — no use?' Sawrey stammered. 'What do you mean? It is her confession!'

'It would be if she had signed it,' Dr. Withers retorted, 'Carpenter! Close that coffin before Mistress Fell comes down! We are not savages!'

This was outrageous! There could be no doubt: Withers had deliberately refused to make the woman sign her declaration.

Hathaway, the hunchback, came down the ladder; Sawrey confronted him the moment he stepped down. 'What the devil does this mean? Why did Barton not take the chains off? Why did he give him the long drop?'

'I don't know, Your Honour,' Hathaway said. 'Ask him.'

When Barton finally came down, Sawrey was beside himself. 'That was a pitiful job!' he cried, the moment the man appeared on the ladder. 'What the devil dost thou mean, acting against my instructions?'

The giant stopped and looked down on him mournfully.

'Dost thou realise that this will cost thee thy job?'

Barton shrugged his shoulders and climbed down.

'God's fish!' Sawrey cried, losing control. 'I'll see to it that thou payest for this! I'll report thee to the regents! I'll . . .' He might as well have shouted at the back of a receding bull.

The next one to come down was the warden himself.'

'Mr. Farragut! I demand an explanation! What went on up there? Who told Barton to act against my instructions? Why was I forced to give the command myself from the tribune?'

The warden, normally a shrewd man who never lost sight of his own interest, looked at him with distaste and said, 'You saw it for yourself, Your Honour.'

'What I saw was a mercy hanging!' he cried. 'I demand an explanation! What got into you people?'

The warden looked as if he were contemplating an answer; then he said, 'Your Honour, if you do not understand after seeing it with your own eyes, nobody can explain it to you.' He turned away.

'I want that boy's skull!' Sawrey shrieked, incoherent with rage. 'I want it on my desk tonight!' He turned to the carpenter and saw that the coffin had already been closed. 'What dost thou mean, closing that coffin before having had my instructions?'

The old man looked up with badly acted innocence. 'Beg pardon, Your Honour?'

'I want that coffin opened and the head sent down to the kitchen! Is that understood?' He became conscious of people watching, realised that he was making a spectacle of himself and turned away, in time to see somebody climbing up the ladder instead of down: the red-haired maid.

Where was Thomas Fell? Why should only the maid appear, not the husband with whom she had been closeted in chambers?

He set out to fight his way through the crowd.

* * *

The moment the woman's voice had started to sing in the courtyard, Thomas Fell had recognised it. He had broken free from Ann's embrace and rushed to a window in the adjoining room, from there he had watched, thunderstruck, the happenings on the scaffold. Ann had joined him; he became aware of her presence only as she ran off when Margaret shook hands with the hangman and the priest.

He knew that he should have gone to the aid of his wife himself, but, stricken by an odd, weary awe, he had returned to the judges' chambers to slump down in the chair behind the desk. There he was sitting, head in hands, when the door opened.

He looked up; it was Sawrey. For a moment he thought something had happened to Margaret, for Sawrey's face was as white as a sheet; but his voice was as pedantic as ever when he said, 'Well, I trust that now you will be good enough to take Madam home?'

It was not a question to put to one's superior, not in that tone. 'Have a care, Sawrey,' he said. 'Control yourself.'

His authority had effect. Sawrey asked in a more reasonable

manner, 'Surely you could hear up here what was happening?'

'I saw it from the window next door. Where is she now?'

'On the scaffold!' Sawrey cried, with a return of outrage. 'She *must* come down! I cannot allow this!'

Thomas eyed the irate man calmly. His outrage gave him a feeling of kinship. Whatever the gratification was that the man must derive from witnessing executions, this time Margaret had robbed him of it. Both of them had been robbed of the consummation of a private passion by her indomitable wilfulness. 'Well,' he said, rising, 'let's go and have a look at what is going on down there.'

'Can you give me the assurance that Mistress Fell will now leave this prison?' Sawrey asked.

For a moment Thomas considered a sharp retort; then he relaxed. 'I am sure she will,' he said. 'She must be shattered. All her life she has been used only to gentleness. Come.'

* * *

When Ann Traylor climbed on to the scaffold, Margaret Fell was sitting at the foot of the gallows, her hands in her lap, eyes closed. Her face looked worse in the sunlight than it had in the twilight of the dungeon; its waxy pallor made the sores and scabs that transfigured it look hideous. Her hair, matted and discoloured by the medication against lice, was like that of any woman prisoner after a long incarceration; there was nothing left of the wilful rich lady who had refused to accept defeat. She was defeated; she needed help.

Ann sat down beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. Margaret Fell opened her eyes and said, 'Ann! I failed! He is dead!'

'Hush,' Ann said, as to a child. 'Thou art exhausted, Margaret. Thou hast done the impossible. Now thou must go home and rest.'

'But I can't! I cannot leave the children! They will think they have been abandoned . . .'

'Hush. Don't fret about them; I'll go to them and stay until thou canst arrange for someone else to relieve me.'

It looked as if the exhausted woman wanted to protest; then she closed her eyes and slumped against her. So they sat when Thomas Fell joined them.

'Come, dear heart,' he said, touching Margaret's shoulder. 'It is time for us to go.'

'I must wait,' Margaret whispered. 'I want to be there when they take him down.'

'He has been taken down,' Thomas said. 'The coffin has been taken away. It is finished.'

He helped her down the ladder. Ann watched from above as they walked to the gateway. He had his arm around her, half carrying her.

Well — there he went. She wondered why she felt no pain, no grief at the thought that probably she would never set eyes on Thomas Fell again. She tried to feel the sadness she should be feeling, but she could feel nothing; all she remembered at that moment was Thomas sitting opposite her at table, saying, 'At that time you still felt you understood my wife?' Suddenly she thought of her diary. God! If anyone found that! She must get back to the inn for her things as soon as possible!

'Miss Traylor? Are you still up there?'

'It was Warden Farragut, at the bottom of the ladder. He had changed from his mourning clothes into his usual suit; his white-plumed hat looked rakish, seen from above.

'Yes, Mr. Farragut?'

'Anything wrong? Can you come down by yourself?'

'Certainly.' She turned around to descend, then she stepped back and called, 'Would you, pray, look away, sir?'

'Oh! Of course, forgive me.' He turned around.

She climbed down; it was scarier than going up had been. There came a moment when she hesitated, about to call for his help; then she felt his hands around her waist. His voice said, surprisingly close, 'That's it, Miss Traylor. You are there.'

She let herself be lifted down and turned to face him with a smile. 'Thank you, sir.'

'Your servant. May I call a chaise for you?'

'I am concerned about the children. I should go down first, before I return to the inn to fetch my things.'

'Your – things?' They had entered the gateway; he stood still.

She gave him her most ravishing smile. 'I am taking Mistress Fell's place.'

'But, my dear young lady — !'

It was the beginning of a fatherly speech. She had had enough of fatherly speeches. 'What do you take us for?' she asked. 'Sentimental flibbertigibbets?'

'But, my dear Miss Traylor — '

'What would you have us do? Occupy ourselves with those poor mites for one month, and then leave them to sink back into the amorph — morph — well, whatever? Once we started, we knew we would have to see it through to the end.'

'What end, for mercy's sake?! These children are in here for years, some of them for life!'

'Nonsense,' she said with growing self-confidence. 'You can't lock up children for life.'

'But, my dear young woman! They were sentenced in a court of law!'

'Well? Sentences can be remitted, can't they? We'll continue to treat them as children until you men have come to recognise them as such. Have you any children yourself?'

'Yes, but — '

'If they are naughty, do you lock them up in a dark cupboard?'

'I certainly do! But that is beside — '

'For life?'

He looked at her; his exasperation became resignation. 'Very well. Do I call a guard to escort you down?'

'Your children have a father to forgive them after they have cried their hearts out in a cupboard for an hour. All the poor mites downstairs had was Mistress Fraley and Dr. Withers; now they have us. We treat them the way you treat your own when they have been up to pranks.'

'Like murder? Armed robbery? Assault?'

She looked at him with a new authority. 'Shame on us all for letting them sink that deep,' she said.

'All right, Miss Traylor.' He smiled. 'Let's continue this discussion some other time. Like tonight? Would it be agreeable to you if I came to see you before going off duty, in case you need any assistance?'

She remembered the warden of Derby jail who had moved into George Fox's cell. She did not think he had done so on the same considerations she read in Mr Farragut's eyes. But what could he get up to in a cell with six children? Five, now. She felt a pang of sadness. 'Very well, Mr. Farragut, that would be kind of you.' She picked up her skirt, to enter the door to the dungeons. 'If you would be so kind, you might ask the maid at the Three Swans to pack my affairs in my valise and bring it to me.' The maid could be trusted with the diary; she could not read. Would he open it before bringing it down? She had to take the risk.

'It will be a privilege,' he said roguishly. 'How long do you expect to be with us, Miss Traylor?'

'Until some other lady turns up to relieve me.'

'Some *other* lady?' She left him standing with his mouth open.

At the top of the well of the stairs a first doubt hit her. The stench and the darkness suddenly gave her the same sense of foreboding as when she had gone down the first time. Again she felt with certainty that a grim fate awaited her down there, that if she did this she would set foot on a road to suffering from which there would be no return. As she stood staring down into the pit, a voice said behind her, 'Don't you want a lantern, miss?' It was the guard.

'Thank you,' she said, took the lantern and started down.

Her trepidation was gone. She felt calm and confident as she descended the stone steps. There was a difference from last time: this time she went down by choice.

On the third landing a voice hailed her from one of the dark passages. 'Miss? Quaker miss?'

She swallowed, then answered calmly, 'Yes?'

'Are you going back to the children, miss?'

'Yes.'

'Would you be willing to teach some others?'

'Which others?'

'Ours,' the voice said. 'Here they come.'

There was a shuffling sound in the darkness; alarmed, she tried to shine her lantern into the darkness; alarmed, she tried to shine her lantern into the dark cavity of the passage. In the feeble light three, four, six children appeared, dressed in rags, their eyes glistening the way the others' had the first time she had seen them by the light of her lantern. How had they got out? They must be debtors' children, who were allowed to roam.

'Hello,' she said shakily.

The children, close together, eyed her without expression. Something seemed to open up inside her, a feeling of tenderness she had never experienced before. She went towards the dismal little figures in the lantern light and said, 'Well, isn't that a surprise! Come, let's go down. You'll see how happy the others will be! We are going to learn how to write, and how to read, and how to do sums, and we are going to sing songs for the whole of Lancaster Castle. What do you think of that?'

None of them answered; they just stared at her, the way the

others had stared, like cornered rats. She remembered how long it had taken them to accept her. 'I am called Ann,' she said. 'You'll have to tell me your names downstairs in the schoolroom. Shall we go? Come, let me carry thee.' She picked up the smallest girl, despite the child's filthy appearance, and was shocked to feel how light she was for her size. 'Here,' she said, holding out the lantern to the tallest boy. 'We're going all the way down.'

The boy, after a moment's hesitation, took the lantern and started down the steps gingerly.

'God bless you, miss!' the voice called from the darkness. Before she had been able to answer, other voices joined from all directions, calling, 'God bless you! God bless, Quaker miss! God bless!'

She did not know which were voices and which echoes.

CHAPTER SIX

THAT evening John Sawrey did something he had not done for a long time. He told the constable to get him a bottle of sack, and when it was delivered to him he locked himself in his pie-shaped little room, determined to get drunk.

The sense of defeat had settled into a dull rage that, he knew from experience, could only be laid to rest if he either vented it on somebody else or knocked himself out with sack. He sat down in his chair, put his feet on the bed, and glowered at the slit-eyed window, bottle in one hand, glass in the other.

Margaret Fell had been too nimble for him. There he was, despite all solemn studies of the faith and the practice of Quakers, despite the beautiful document in which she had been supposed to incriminate herself — if he had not cried out to Carter Barton, there would not have been any hanging at all that day and the disaster would have been complete. Now, although some of the notables had complained, their wives had obviously received another kind of thrill which left them with enough gossip to last them through the summer. Even Mistress Jones, the widow of the boy's victim, had scurried out of the courtyard in an uncharacteristically subdued manner, avoiding him.

The point that rankled most was: How had Margaret Fell done it? How had she managed to throw a spell over hardened

men like Dr. Withers and Barton? Had Barton expected to have his palm crossed with gold by Chief Justice Fell? No, incredible as it might seem, the dim-witted ox had done himself irreparable harm just to please her. And Dr. Withers? Only a week or so before, he had stood in the office downstairs foaming with rage about Quakers, swearing that if ever he could lay his hands on the Fell woman and prove she was a Quakeress, he would have her in chains; now he had conspired with her to suppress incriminating evidence. She was a witch, all right, a Quaker witch, And she had slipped through his fingers.

He was slouched in his chair, grimly nursing his rage, when there was a knock. 'Yes?'

Somebody tried the door; he remembered he had locked it. He went to open it; Warden Farragut came in, hat in hand.

'Yes, Farragut, what is it?'

'Your Honour, I have news for you. Mistress Fell's maid has moved in.'

'Moved in?'

'With the children, instead of her mistress.'

'And you permitted it?'

'Your Honour, I do not have the authority to stop her. That's why I came to see you. What do I do?'

He was about to shout, 'Throw her out, of course!' when the thought hit him: Hold it; Margaret Fell is putting her plan into operation. 'Did the girl say how long she intends to stay?'

'Yes, Your honour. Until someone turns up to relieve her.'

'Thank you. I'll think about it.'

'Very well, Your Honour.'

His mood changed. Gone were the rage, the thoughts of defeat and failure. The woman was going to mobilise others. That meant she would be back. Only by her example could she persuade other women.

The bottle was three quarters empty and his spirits were high when there was another knock at the door.

'Come in!'

It was Carter Barton, huge and melancholy. 'Your Honour, here it is.' He held out a package wrapped in burlop.

'What is that?'

'The skull, sir.'

'Oh — all right. Put it there, on the bed.'

'Yes, Your Honour.' The man put the package on the bed and shambled out of the room.

He rose unsteadily, went to the bed, opened the burlap and let the contents roll out. There were two parts; they had not attached the lower jaw. He glowered at the small white skull. Henry Jones. When the boy had appeared in court, his fate had already been sealed; General Evans, Mistress Jones' brother, had gone out of his way to suggest to him that there was no point in going too deeply into the whole affair; his late brother-in-law's reputation should not come under discussion during the trial. The trial had not taken more than twenty minutes; murder most foul, breach of trust, monstrous ingratitude, black cap, by the neck until death, God have mercy on thy soul.

The ghoulish little skull precipitated the maudlin phase of drunkenness. Gone were the high spirits, the broad grin at the darkening window; he slouched back to his chair and slumped in it. He was weak, he was vile. Vile, vile; John Sawrey, thou art vile. For all thou knowest, it might have been Christ. Judas, that's who thou art. Judas Iscariot.

He pondered over the thought. Judas must have been a man like himself: brooding, turned inward; pity so little was known about him. Pity everybody had done nothing for thousands of years but spit at the mere mention of his name. Thirty pieces of silver, betrayed his Master, vile, vile, Judas Iscariot, thou art vile. But had Judas done his dark deed only for a paltry sum of money? Ah! The darkness of the human soul! What had driven Judas? What drove John Sawrey, who would not rest until Margaret Fell lay in front of him as Henry Jones lay now; a skull freshly boiled in the basement? Why, for God's sake, why? Ambition? Thirty pieces of silver? Judas had hanged himself after having done his foul deed; yet by that deed he had saved mankind. Without him there would have been no atonement. Without Judas there would have been no crucifixion, no supreme sacrifice, no hope for mankind until the end of time. Judas was more important than any of the other Disciples; they had fallen asleep at the gate, and blundered about cutting off people's ears, and when it came to their Master's tortured death they had been nowhere to be seen. God, who in His unfathomable wisdom had ordained His Son to be murdered on the cross, had needed Judas. If Judas at the last moment had said, 'No! I can't do it!' then God would have been forced to find Himself another.

He sat upright in his chair, with the drunken feeling of having touched upon a great secret. Judas had acted upon God's instructions. *That* was the dark power which drove him: God.

God's plan for the world demanded that he, John Sawrey, do this foul deed: hunt down Margaret Fell and then stand, tears streaming down his face, among the crowd as she was nailed to the cross and raised screaming in the sky, where she would die in torment.

Suddenly, drunken, he burst into tears, his head in his hands. 'Oh, Margaret, Margaret! Why must I destroy thee?'

But, though his grief was real, he knew that he would get her in the end.

* * *

In their bedchamber at the inn, Thomas Fell was helping his wife bathe by sponging her back for her. It moved him deeply seeing her there in the hip bath the maids had brought in, so fragile, so white, so utterly exhausted by the mad demands her indomitable will had imposed upon her.

He gently sponged her back with the insect bites and the mysterious weals. What a supreme effort it must have been for her, with her gentle upbringing and delicate constitution! He was full of admiration and affection; never had he felt more tenderly disposed towards her, never before had she seemed so hungry for his protection. It was as if she had emerged from a frightening dream.

He had arranged for supper to be served in their rooms. Candles, wine, he had even chosen the flowers. The maids knocked and asked if they could set the table; while behind the closed door the dishes and the tumblers were set out with a discreet tinkling of silver and crystal, he rubbed her down and produced the white, downy robe he had bought for her at the same time he bought Ann Traylor's riding cloak. It had been an infantile gesture of contrition; now he was happy he had done so. She was delighted with the robe; her eyes, large in the pallid face sharpened by deprivation, seemed to light up. He helped her put it on.

When he heard the outer door in the other room close, he led her in to see the table. The way she gazed at the candles, the silver, the crystal, the wine broke his heart. She gazed at the flowers, a bouquet of bright crimson tulips with sprigs of fern.

'Aren't they lovely?' he asked.

'Those are the colours the women should wear.'

'Pardon?'

'It would prevent their being assaulted.'

'Which women?'

'The ones that will work in the prison. I wonder how Ann is faring.'

She rattled him for a moment; then he realised that she could not be expected to make the transition from one world to the other in a few hours. He had to be prepared for her harking back to those days and nights for a while yet.

The maids came in to serve supper. He had chosen light and tempting food and selected an innocent little claret to smooth out her tension. She did not touch the food or sip the wine, but she appeared to relax as he kept up an inconsequential chatter. She looked so tranquil as she sat there gazing at the candle flames that she jolted him again when she said suddenly, 'I killed him.'

'Excuse me?'

'My love pervaded the prison and tenderised all concerned; but they hanged him. Lovingly.'

'Dear heart, I have no idea what thou art talking about.'

'When George Fox saved the girl in Derby, he was not loving or tender. He cried. "Stop!" and they stopped. I made everybody, including the hangman, lovable, but George Fox saved her life.'

He sighed. 'Dear heart, thou wilt have to enlighten me first. What is this business about George Fox in Derby?'

'He prevented a woman from being hanged by shouting "Stop!" at the moment they were about to spring the trap door.' She closed her eyes.

He observed her with a beginning of coldness. What was this tall story? He had never heard such nonsense in his life. Damn George Fox! But he should humour her. 'Tell me a little more. Were there any witnesses? Was it a public execution?'

Her eyes, as she gazed at the candle flames, were filling with tears. Poor dear, she was shattered. Should he allow her to go on with this, or take her in his arms?

'The girl in Derby struggled and screamed and fought to the last. But I drugged Henry and took all the fight out of him, until he let them do with him what they wanted. I took away his will to live.' The tears were running down her face now. She looked anguished at that moment, piteous.

Averting his eyes, he picked up his glass. 'I can understand thou art distressed about this, dear heart, but suppose thou hadst stopped the execution this morning; what would have happened? Another execution would have been ordered and measures would have been taken that this time there would be no interference.

Even if the death sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment, what would have been his future? He would have spent the rest of his days in prison, half blind. No wonder the child lacked the will to live.' He put his hand on hers. 'Frankly, dearest, I consider what thou didst a greater miracle than whatever Mr. Fox may have done in Derby. Thou didst prevail upon vicious and vindictive men to help a child they had planned to torture to death. The boy was executed in as swift and humane a manner as possible. That is what *I* would call a miracle. Admittedly, I may lack faith in not accepting the other one.'

Her face seemed to soften. 'George and I had an argument about this. I said that I considered miracles to be harmful, because only certain people could perform them. I could not accept that God would manifest Himself only to His chosen.'

'I think the secret simply is, dear heart,' he said kindly, 'that thou art a woman. Mr. Fox's yelled command and thy tenderness are worlds apart.'

'But the boy is dead.'

'Indeed. The boy is dead because he had no will to live. Our Saviour's determination to have Himself crucified must have bewildered rational people too.'

'It's no good,' she said. 'Whatever thou sayest, whatever anybody says, I know I have the blood of that child on my hands.'

He looked at her with concern. Would she go on blaming herself for the rest of her life for not having performed a miracle? 'Just as a matter of interest,' he asked, 'did Mr. Fox happen to know the young lady he saved? Was she a friend of his? Had he ever had conversation with her?'

'I knon't know. Does it matter?'

'What bothers me about Mr. Fox's love for humanity is its impersonal nature. He loves love itself.'

'That's what Henrietta used to say. I have never understood what troubled her so. I don't think it's true.'

Suddenly he had had enough of honouring Mr. Fox on this particular night in their lives. 'My dear, I am sure thou wilt go on blaming thyself for a long time. But do not expect me to agree with thee. I was there. I saw a courtyard full of people who until that moment had been no better than rabid animals turn into a crowd in prayer. I saw their faces when they left. I seriously believe that what thou didst will have a greater influence on their lives and their values than any magic trick Mr. Fox might have performed.' She looked at him intently; it encouraged him to

add, 'I think it philosophically possible that there is such a thing as elemental goodness in the universe. If so, thou went, during those moments on the scaffold, its incarnation. As such, thou hast given a lot of people hope. At least, that's what thou hast given me.'

Suddenly she rose to her feet and came to him. She threw her arms around his neck, cried, 'Oh, Tom . . .!' and broke down in his embrace.

As he sat there, gently stroking her hair, he was struck by the thought: Perhaps she is a saint. It gave him a sense of unfairness. What had he done to deserve this? For whether one lost one's wife to a lover or to saintliness, the result was the same.

'Oh, Tom, Tom,' she sobbed, 'I love thee so.'

He kissed her hair and continued to stroke it soothingly as he felt the return of the old, familiar melancholy.

* * *

'No!' Thomas Fell cried angrily the next morning. 'I will *not*! I have arrived at an age where I am no longer prepared to put up with sudden changes of plan and fickle decisions!'

'I am sorry,' Margaret said coldly. 'I have not arrived at that age yet.' She poured herself another cup of tea. careful to keep up a front of determination, but she was ashamed of herself. How was it possible? Twenty-four hours after Henry's death she was having a row with her husband at the breakfast table, he in his nightshirt, she in the beautiful robe he had chosen with such care and tenderness. How odious, how degrading!

'Very well!' he said with black determination. 'Give me one good reason. Just one!'

'I could give thee two if only thou wouldst give me the chance.'

'Oh!' he cried, and there he went, stamping up and down again in his nightshirt, looking ridiculous, and very angry.

'For one thing, I promised the children.'

He turned on her, 'Thou didst promise the children! And what about thy own children, whom we promised that thou wouldst return today? Who will be waiting anxiously, peering out of the window?'

'They will have to go on peering awhile longer,' she said calmly. 'The children in prison have been abandoned all their lives. I cannot walk away from them saying "I'll be straight back" and never be seen again.'

'Oh, great merciful Turk!' he cried. 'And thy second reason?'

'Dear heart, in thy present mood . . .'

'The second reason! That's all I ask!'

'All right: Ann Traylor. Do we leave her there? All by herself in that dungeon, without a soul who cares about her except that leering warden?'

'Which warden?'

'Farragut. His name is Hyman. And, it seems to me, that is what he is after.'

He burst into laughter, somewhat forced, she thought. 'Oh, all right! I give up. Is thy family ever to see thee again?'

'Don't be foolish. But I must arrange for someone to take Ann's place.'

'Who?'

'There must be plenty of women like myself who —'

'Heaven forbid! One per generation is enough!'

'Don't start shouting all over again,' she said. 'I plan to ask Henrietta Best.'

'I forbid thee to do that! I happen to like the woman. I don't want her to end up in the cell with the lunatics!'

'Would it not rather be up to her to decide?'

He leaned his fists on the table and bent over to her, looking elderly and frail without his wig. She should really not subject him to these strains.

'Beloved Margaret,' he said, 'thou canst not go on arranging people's lives for them. Thou must at a given moment make up thy mind to arrange thy own.'

'Well, that's what I am doing. I am trying to arrange it so that I can go home as soon as possible.'

He looked at her with determination. 'Thou art going home today.'

'But, dear heart . . .'

'Thou art going home today! If somebody has to remain behind to watch over Ann Traylor, I will. I'll stay here until thou hast caught some unsuspecting female and trussed her and carried her into those dungeons like a pig. For that is the way it will have to be done; thou wilt not find any woman ready to go down there voluntarily, not one!'

'I know one.'

'Henrietta Best! I told thee, thou art not —'

'Meg.'

'Which Meg?'

'Our Meg. Mistress Best wrote she is distressed that I took Ann Traylor instead of her.' She knew that this was going to bring the roof down. But he had to know sometime, it might as well be now.

'Meg?!' he cried, the beginning of the cave-in. 'That *child*?!'

'She is the same age as Ann, dear heart, and a good deal stronger.'

'Never! Never in a thousand years! I —'

A knock upon the door cut him short. 'Yes! No!' He gathered up his nightshirt. 'Who is it?'

'The maid, sir,' a voice replied from the passage. 'There's a lady here to see Mistress Fell.'

'Which lady?'

'A Mistress Jones. sir.'

'Jones?' He turned to her. 'Do we know any Mistress Jones?'

'Not in Lancaster.' Then, suddenly, it struck her. 'Wait a minute!'

'Huh?'

'Out!' she said, rising. 'Quick! Into the bedchamber! Out, out!' She went to the door.

'What the devil —'

'It's *she*!' She pushed him towards the bedroom door. 'Henry's mother!'

'What —'

'Quick!' She closed the door behind him, crossed the room and opened the one to the passage. The maid stepped aside as a dark woman in widow's weeds emerged from the shadows.

'Mistress Jones? Come in, please. Forgive me, I am not properly dressed to receive visitors.'

'I fear I have come at an inappropriate hour,' the woman said. 'But I had to see you.'

'Please come in.' The woman entered; Margaret closed the door and gestured to a chair. 'Please sit down.'

The woman had not heard her. She stood there, forbidding in her black mourning clothes, her gloved hands clasped in front of her.

'Will you not sit down?'

Again it seemed as if she had not heard. She was handsome in a dark, fiery way, but her face, stark white, seemed distorted by an inner tension that must be almost unbearable.

'Mistress Jones? Would you not sit down?'

Tears welled up in those black, burning eyes; the woman said in a strangled whisper, 'I have not slept all night. I — I had to see

you . . .' She opened her purse and rummaged in it, searching for a kerchief, with which she dabbed her eyes. Then she took a breath, tried to smile and continued. 'You loved him, didn't you?'

The question startled Margaret, but she took care not to show it. 'Yes,' she said.

'So did I. Believe it or not, so did I.' The haunted eyes searched hers with chilling intensity. 'But yesterday I came to see him tortured. I had promised the hangman three louis if he protracted it as long as possible.' She had to dab her eyes again with her handkerchief; her hands were shaking.

'Come,' Margaret said, putting an arm around the woman's shoulders to guide her to a chair. 'Sit down.'

But the other would not be budged; her body was rigid. 'I . . . You know, I presume, what happened? Why — why Henry was hanged?'

'You mean, what he had done?'

The woman nodded stiffly in a supreme effort to hold back her tears.

'I never wanted to know.'

'You — you did not *want* to?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because it did not matter to me.'

'You did not know that he murdered his father?'

Margaret wondered how she could coax the poor woman out of whatever it was that held her in its grip. 'I heard something of the sort,' she said, 'but I did not know the details. And I don't want to know them now.'

'But that's why I came!' the woman cried, her voice taut and harsh. 'I came to tell the truth!'

Margaret had no idea what the woman was about to say, but beyond the bedroom door her husband stood listening. She could not allow this desperate soul to incriminate herself before an eavesdropping judge. 'Mistress Jones,' she said firmly, 'please pull yourself together. You must not do this. I beg you!'

'I must!' the other cried. 'I must tell *somebody*! I cannot live with it any longer!' She seemed about to break down.

Margaret put her arm around the shoulders of the woman again and said urgently, 'What is done is done, Mistress Jones. Henry is dead. Now you must find a way to give a sense to his death, not bring about more pain, more suffering.'

'A sense?' She sighed. 'You are right. They are both dead. There has been enough suffering . . . May I help myself to some tea?'

'Oh — of course, certainly. Let me, please . . .' Margaret wondered whether Thomas indeed had his ear to the door.

'You know,' the woman said, when she sat stirring her tea, 'I have the strangest feeling. To me, he is not dead.' She smiled nervously. 'Is it because I don't want to believe? To me, he is everywhere I go. Do you believe in such a thing?'

'I don't know,' Margaret replied.

'I see.' She took a sip of tea. Putting the cup down, she said, 'You talked about giving some sense to — to it all. What did you mean?'

Margaret was confused; she had said it on the spur of the moment. Suddenly she was moved to say, 'Why don't we find out by going into meeting?'

'Meeting?'

'Let's sit for a moment in silence and ask God for guidance.'

Without waiting for the other to agree, she closed her eyes, folded her hands in her lap and sank at once, with practised ease, into the stillness from which that of God would rise within her. This time, what rose was an image: the cell, the children, Ann Traylor. How was she? Who was going to replace her? She opened her eyes and gazed at the woman opposite as she was struck by a preposterous thought. It was impossible! No, this was nonsense . . .

As if she had felt Margaret's regard, the other looked up. 'Well?' she asked in a whisper.

'Would you be prepared to do what I did?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Go into that prison to help the children who are locked up in there? There is a girl with them now, from my household. She is young and inexperienced. She cannot stay there for any length of time.'

'I don't quite understand . . .'

'You know what we are doing, don't you, for those children? Henry was one of them.'

The woman stared at her in disbelief. 'You . . . you can't be . . . You mean *me*?'

'Why not? Don't you want to?'

'But, my dear! You have no idea what you are asking! I mean, you don't know . . . you don't know me at all!'

'What is thy name?'

'Bronwen . . .'

'Let's go back into the silence, Bronwen. If He whispers in thy thoughts that thou must go, go. Do not judge thyself, just open thyself for His will to rise within thee. Thou wilt know, the moment thy head is empty of all thoughts, judgments, wishes, except for the desire to love Henry, wherever he may be.'

She closed her eyes again to escape from the other's haunted stare, folded her hands, bent her head and prayed, 'God, Love, whatever Thou art — help us.'

* * *

They sat motionless and in silence for so long that Thomas Fell wondered what the devil was going on in there. Convinced that they must have left, he opened the door and peered in, to be met by his wife's solemn face.

'Pardon,' he mumbled, and hastily retired. The devil, he thought, the devil!

He dressed briskly; as he put on his wig in front of the mirror, he muttered, 'What next?'

Suddenly the connecting door opened and Margaret stuck her head in. 'Tom?' she asked, in her visitor's voice. 'Come and meet Mistress Jones. She is going to take Ann Traylor's place.'

He blurted out in spite of himself, 'She is *what*!?'

Margaret gave him a stern look and said loudly, 'Maybe thou wouldst be kind enough to keep Mistress Jones company for a moment while I dress quickly? Then perhaps thou wouldst escort us to the castle, so I can show Mistress Jones the way? We do have the coach-and-pair here, don't we?'

'Yes, er — yes!' he replied loudly, beckoning her into the bed-chamber. She came in and closed the door behind her. 'Go along,' she whispered, 'be a dear, keep her company. I won't be a moment.'

'Thou art stark, raving mad!' he said in an outraged whisper. 'Not *that* woman! I forbid it!'

'Why not?' Her expression told him that she had dug her heels in.

'I have only heard part,' he whispered, 'but enough to suspect that it was not the boy who brained her husband with a poker, but she!'

'Hush!'

'Hush?! That boy was sexually abused by the man, she must have come upon them, and — '

'*Hush!*' She faced him, eyes blazing. 'Thou hast heard nothing! Chief Justices do not listen at doors.'

'Well! Of all the — '

'Unless thou art prepared to disprove that, under oath, in court!'

He looked at her incredulously. 'My God,' he said, more baffled than outraged, 'and there was I, thinking thou hadst become a saint!'

'Well, perhaps I am.'

'That woman belongs in prison!' he cried, in a last effort to bring her to her senses.

'Well — that is where she is going.' She swept past him and began to unbutton her robe. 'Don't keep the poor woman sitting there all by herself! Go and tell her about our roses. Her husband and she grew roses. Tell her about ours.'

He straightened his coat and opened the door.

Mistress Jones turned out to be a surprisingly handsome woman; his composure was not aided by the discovery that she and her husband had never dreamed of growing roses. Damn Margaret and her tricks! A saint indeed! Suddenly he decided this was ridiculous. He could not, as Chief Justice, allow a murderess to get away so she might help his wife in her imperious concern. 'Tell me, Mistress Jones,' he said casually. 'It was you who killed your husband, was it not?'

She showed an enormous amount of pluck. She faced him calmly, with only a slight hardening of the look in her fierce black eyes; then she replied levelly, 'As it happens, I did not. I tried to tell your wife this, but she did not think it important.'

'Just as a matter of interest, what *did* happen?'

She rose. 'Justice Fell,' she said in a tone that reminded him of Margaret, 'I agree with your wife. I think it no longer matters. I did not kill him. As to the rest, let us grant the dead their peace.'

He rose too, 'Mistress Jones, I am afraid that this is not quite satisfactory. I may have to ask you for a more explicit explanation, at your convenience.'

'To what end? To drag my husband's private life through the courts? What purpose would that serve, other than an abstract notion of justice? He was a good man. A kind man, a loving man. None of us are perfect, are we?'

He bowed. If the damn woman did not want to make a confession, there was no way of forcing her. 'Indeed, Madam. Some of us lie, some of us steal, others hang an innocent child.'

She did not flinch. 'How true.' She picked up her gloves; then she added, 'Have you ever been the victim of a rage, sir? A rage so black, so satanic, that you no longer knew what you were doing?'

How Welsh she was! 'Can't say I have,' he replied.

She started to pull on her gloves. 'Your wife is a noble woman, sir. She gives one back one's belief that God is a God of mercy. Which, I gather, is not your concept of Him. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, is it not? I thought so too, until I saw her on the scaffold, helping my child face — ' Suddenly, alarmingly, she collapsed on a chair and burst into tears.

'Mistress Jones! I beg you . . .' He heard the door open behind him and there was Margaret, gown open, hair loose. She rushed towards the sobbing woman, put her arms around her as if she were a child and gave him a look that made him back into the bedchamber and close the door softly.

* * *

When Margaret told Warden Farragut that Mistress Jones was to take Ann Traylor's place, the poor man looked so flabbergasted that, despite the solemnity of the occasion, she had trouble keeping her face straight. Obviously, he thought it an elaborate joke, but Bronwen Jones' authority was such that when she asked peremptorily for a lantern to take with her down into the dungeons, he instantly obliged. He even offered to take the good ladies himself, but the fiery Bronwen said, 'No, thank you, that won't be necessary.'

As they descended into the dungeons, Bronwen Jones' reaction was interesting. Margaret wondered whether she herself had looked like that when she went down for the first time; tense, her eyes filled with horror. Her feeling of empathy with the woman grew. At the inn, the idea of her taking over had seemed grotesque; it became less so during their long, winding way to the lowest level. Whatever Bronwen Jones might be, she was obviously a strong and fearless woman who would be able to cope with any situation that might arise. Whether she would have the love that the children needed above all else was not so evident.

Finally they entered the dark passage and heard the madwomen squeal and slam their chains against the bars at their

approach. In the lantern light, Bronwen Jones' face seemed hard and impassive as they passed the cage with the sad creatures who stretched out their claws towards them; on an impulse, Margaret shook a few of them by the hand, saying, 'Good morning, good morning. How nice to see you again!' To her surprise, a few voices answered, 'Welcome back! Nice to see thee, Maggie!' Others, alas, beyond the reach of humanity went berserk and made such a racket with their chains that a fight broke out. It was deeply distressing to see the demented creatures go for each other, pulling each other's hair, throwing each other down, lashing out at one another with their chains. She took Bronwen Jones' arm and pulled her past the piteous scene. When, at last they reached the gate of the children's cell, she called, 'Ann!' Then her mouth fell open.

In the light of four candles sat a large group of children, in pairs, each pair with a hornbook in front of them. Ann, looking prim and stern, was in the process of teaching them the alphabet. When she saw Margaret, she rose to open the door for her; five of the children leaped to their feet and came running towards her. For a few minutes they swarmed all over Margaret, tugging at her gown, throwing their arms around her neck, her legs, kissing her; she knelt in the straw and little Jody, hooting joyously, climbed on to her lap. The child was so tenacious that when she finally had freed herself of the others and was able to rise to her feet again, the little girl clung to her. So, with Jody in her arms, Margaret asked, 'Who are these new ones?'

'Children from other floors,' Ann explained calmly; she did not appear disturbed or distressed by her first night in prison. 'Their parents are debtors; I was asked to include them in the class.'

'How wonderful!' Margaret said. She went to the children, shook them by the hand, asked them for their names, looking with pity and concern at their sad, dirty faces, the vermin in their hair, their filthy rags. Then she realised that she had not introduced her new companion. 'Ann, this is Mistress Jones, Henry's —'

Bronwen Jones was in no condition to be introduced. She stood with her hands in front of her face, shoulders heaving. Margaret had forgotten the impact the sight of the children had on someone who saw them for the first time; to her, the dungeon looked so clean and neat and the straw so fresh that, foolishly, she had expected to be complimented on it. But her sense of relief

was profound. Bronwen Jones would come to love the children just as she did, and that, she now knew, was the key that unlocked their humanity.

After her first moments of shock and pity, Bronwen was very practical in her discussions with Ann, who was obviously relieved that she was not going to be left to her own devices. There were things she needed: more hornbooks, slates and clothing for the new children. Bronwen promised she would see to it and return later in the day to help her bathe and change the newcomers.

Back in the warden's office, they were told that Justice Fell presented his compliments and asked his good wife if she would be so kind as to tarry awhile; he was in chambers with Justice Sawrey and would be out soon. 'Come,' Margaret said. 'Why don't we go for a stroll in the sun while we are waiting? Mr. Farragut, when my husband arrives, would you tell him that he can find us by the statue in the square?'

'Very good, Madam ... Madam ...' The warden bowed to both of them.

Outside in the sunlit square they sat down on a bench near St. George. Pigeons were out in force, strutting and cooing; the starlings had gone. The square looked as if summer had finally arrived.

'Ah,' Margaret said, lifting her face to the sun. 'How good it is to be in the open! It makes one giddy to breathe this sweet, clean air after the dungeons.'

The woman beside her studied her. 'Thou art very pale,' she said matter-of-factly. 'And thou must do something about those pustules. Is it the food? I ask because I must know what to expect.'

'No, it's the vermin.'

'What kind?'

'Bedbugs. Rather like ticks, large, reddish; they live in cracks in the walls and come out at night; there's nothing you can do about them. I scrubbed the cell from top to bottom, had the straw changed, doused the children with hunting water, but the bugs won.'

'I wonder if there is a salve that would stop them biting.'

Margaret looked at her with admiration. Such equanimity! It was a miracle, as when George Fox had first brought in John McHair. How long ago that seemed, how little she had known then of the true nature of God, as well as her own.

Suddenly Bronwen took her arm. 'We must talk about the children,' she said. 'We must get them out of there.'

'How? I know how fiercely men cling to punishment and revenge.'

'Not just men,' the other said soberly. 'I did so myself.'

'But what could we do? With the children, I mean, once we had taken them out of there?'

'Put them somewhere where they can see the sun and breathe clean air; a house in the country. The men may surround it with bars if they like, but the inside should be like any other house: warm, safe, secure — a house for children.'

'Ah! And no jailers! But motherly women . . .'

'Why not include men? Those children should have fathers as well as mothers. What we should try to find are married couples prepared to take a number of them under their wing and treat them as their own.' She glanced at Margaret. 'I know how this sounds, considering I started only this morning, but my husband and I have been thinking along these lines for a long time, about abandoned children, orphans. My husband — ' She fell silent.

'It sounds wonderful,' Margaret said lightly. 'But let's discuss our next step first. We must begin with the wives of men in power. They should see the children; the rest will take care of itself.'

'I hope so.'

'Why not?'

'I do not think thou wilt find many women prepared to do what thou hast done.'

'For someone who has just joined me . . .'

'Do not count me. My reasons are, pray God, unique.' There was a moment of uneasy silence between them. Then the other said abruptly, 'I want thee to know that I am not doing this as an act of expiation.'

Suddenly the memory of Henry was so real that Margaret's eyes filled with tears. She saw his grimy hand holding the buttercup, heard him say, 'For thee.' She must not think about him; if she allowed herself to think . . . He was dead and gone forever. What had happened could not be changed.

'Well,' she said, rising, 'thou hadst better start getting those things together.'

'I will.' Bronwen Jones held out her hand. 'Farewell, Margaret. Have a good rest. Come back soon. But not too soon; stay with thy family awhile. It is a great blessing to have a family. It is

from them that a mother's strength derives.' Abruptly, she rose and walked away, tall and elegant in her widow's weeds.

Margaret watched her until she was gone.

* * *

'Why do you want to know?' Sawrey asked.

Go easy now, Thomas Fell thought. 'Oh, just as a matter of interest. I should like to know a little more about her, as she is going to take my good wife's place with the children here.'

Sawrey's eyes acquired an odd remoteness, like those of a predator: without malice, without involvement. 'That certainly comes as a surprise,' he said dispassionately.

'I thought I would let you know. As provost, you may find cause to restrict their activities somewhat, or before you know it you'll have women swarming all over the prison, poking their noses into affairs that are none of their business.'

'I would not worry about that,' Sawrey said. 'Mistress Jones is an exceptional case.'

'Ah?'

'Was that not what you wished to find out?'

'What would her reasons be?'

Sawrey sized him up with that cold, impersonal look. 'Are you familiar with Mayor Jones' reputation?'

'In what respect?'

'The sin of Tiberius.'

So he *had* opened that letter! 'Oh, that. Why?'

'I don't know whether you ever saw the boy; he had an eye struck out during the struggle.'

'I only saw him once, briefly, when I showed my wife around the prison.'

'But you have seen Mistress Jones. She would be capable of eruptions of rage, don't you think?'

'I wouldn't know. Handsome woman, if one is partial to the type.'

'The type that commits violence in a paroxysm of Welsh fury?'

'Good heavens!' Thomas feigned shocked surprise. 'Are you suggesting that not the boy, but the woman . . .?'

'Her testimony was that she heard the sound of an altercation; when she entered the room she found her husband lying with his head in the fireplace, the back of his skull crushed; the

boy standing over him with a poker. But I would not put it beyond Mistress Jones to have come upon her husband and the boy *in flagrante*, and to have expressed her emotions. Forcibly.'

Very astute, Thomas thought, but this was where it had to stop. 'Sawrey,' he said. 'if these are your findings, I expect a report, after which I will order an enquiry into the manner in which the trial was conducted.'

'I was simply guessing.' Sawrey appeared unruffled, but he had taken the hint.

'I could not remain amiably indulgent of the possibility that an innocent boy may have been condemned to death because of — what? Insufficient investigation? Pressure from outside? Those would be the questions that would have to be answered.'

'Don't worry,' Sawrey said with a faint smile. 'I know that Mistress Jones has powerful friends. And that we have no case,' he added judiciously.

Thomas picked up his gloves. 'Indeed we have not.' He rose. 'By the way — I would appreciate it if you were to keep an eye on the member of my household who is still here. Miss Traylor.'

'It will be a privilege.'

'Thank you. Good day.' He bowed perfunctorily and went to the door.

'Your servant,' he heard Sawrey say behind him.

As he walked down the corridor, he decided that if the tide were favourable and they arrived in time, he would ask his neighbour the squire of Holker Hall to lend him a couple of horses so Margaret and he might cross the sands tonight, rather than be driven all the way around and have to spend the night in Kendal. He was eager to be home.

* * *

'No, dear heart, I don't think it's quite safe yet,' Thomas Fell said. 'We should wait another ten minutes. Let's rest for a moment.'

He helped Margaret dismount; it was a strange sensation to her to slide out of a saddle again after such a long time. And yet it had only been a month.

'Let's sit down here,' he said, leading her to the edge of the bluffs. 'We can see what the tide is doing, and enjoy the sunset.'

They sat down in the bracken. Behind them, the borrowed horses began to browse in the succulent heather. In another week or so it would be too tough, fit only for sheep. Strange, to come back to all this. It still was unreal to her, like a dream.

'Pity we can't see the house,' he said.

She gazed out over the water, flashing and sparkling in the setting sun which obliterated the details of the bluffs across the estuary, the roofs of Swarthmoor. 'How nice we can be home tonight,' she said. 'It was kind of Squire Holker.'

'Yes.' He tossed his hat aside and stretched out in the heather. 'Ah, this feels good after the town!'

She smiled.

'I know,' he said, eyes closed. 'The contrast must be even more striking to thee.'

She reached out and put her hand on his arm.

Without opening his eyes, he took it, brought it to his lips, kissed it and put it back on his arm. 'Ah . . . This is bliss!' Then, after a while, 'I wonder how Henrietta Best has been getting on. I gather you corresponded.'

'She seems to have managed very well. The children appear to like her.'

'I do too.' He yawned and rubbed his nose. It was a long time since she had seen him so relaxed. They should do this more often, just sit in the bracken somewhere and watch the sun go down.

'I think I know what happened,' he said.

'H'm?'

'To brain a man with a poker takes some doing, for an eleven-year-old boy. And the man was lying with his head in the fireplace, the back of his skull crushed. He must have stumbled, fallen backwards and brained himself on one of the andirons. I think she went for the boy with the poker.'

Her tranquil joy darkened. 'Why canst thou not leave the dead to bury the dead?'

'Dear heart,' he said, 'it is my professional deformity. I happen to be obsessed by a passion for truth.'

'Art thou sure it is for truth?'

He opened his eyes. 'What else would it be?'

'Just for sport. The boyish desire to put salt on Mistress Jones' tail.'

'That I would not mind at all.'

She bent over and kissed his nose. There were lines around his

mouth that had not been there before. Yet it seemed only yesterday they had sat like this on the other side of the water, in their courting days. He had toyed with his stick in the bracken and said, in the urbane tone that had impressed her so deeply at the time, 'As old Aaron Cartwright once remarked, "Life and the universe are not only much more complicated than thou thinkest, they are more complicated than thou canst think." ' She hadn't remembered that for years.

'How is the tide doing?' he asked, yawning. 'Canst thou see Chapel Island shoal yet?'

She looked. The silver stretch of water still lay unbroken around the low silhouette of the island, the ruins of the monastery. 'Not yet. Try and sleep awhile. I'll waken thee.'

'H'm.'

She looked at his delicate hands, folded on his chest; his face in repose. 'Let me take thy wig,' she said.

'H'm.' He lifted his head, eyes closed.

She took the wig off, careful not to snarl the curls in the bracken, and put it on her lap.

'That feels good. Thank thee, love.'

She smiled down on him, and was suddenly chilled. The way he lay there, his head with its shorn grey hair, his hands folded on his chest, he looked as if he had just died. What a horrible thought! She turned away and looked at the sunset, but the thought of death remained with her. How brief life was! Briefest of all, Henry's. She heard Bronwen Jones. 'I have the strangest feeling he is not dead.'

It seemed unacceptable that a person should vanish into nothing. It could not be; it made no sense. Yet here she sat, gazing at the setting sun, with a feeling of acceptance that she had never known before. Now that she had experienced the reality of God, she could accept His mystery.

Thomas sat up and looked at the receding tide. 'We had better start moving,' he said, 'or it will be dark by the time we reach the quicksands. And we are not Mr. Fox and his friend.'

As he fetched the horses, she sat watching the sun, thinking about George. She had not thought about him for a long time. Where was he? What was he doing? *All He has is thee.* She wondered if he really knew how right he had been.

'Dear heart, here's thy beast. Could I have my wig, please?'

They went down the bluff cautiously, the horses' hoofs slithering in the bracken. Once they reached the hard, firm sand, they

set out at a gallop for the row of brogs that marked the path between the sinkholes. The setting sun touched the distant shore; they cantered into the immensity of the sands, trailing, for a brief moment, long shadows behind them.

HISTORICAL NOTE

Of all Protestant sects in seventeenth-century England, the Quakers were the most savagely persecuted, by both the civil authorities and the church. They were hounded, beaten, robbed, imprisoned; some Meetings were so brutally uprooted that only the children were left to gather for worship. At the time of the Restoration there were over forty thousand Quakers in England, all of them fair game for any minor magistrate or irate mob.

Margaret Fell and her household held out against the rising tide of persecution until, in 1660, Judge Thomas Fell died. Almost that very day Justice Sawrey moved in upon them. They were expelled from the Hall; Margaret Fell's property was confiscated; she and her daughters moved from house to house in the twilight of the Quaker underground until, in 1664, she was arrested and sentenced to six years' imprisonment in Lancaster Castle. It was the longest prison term ever imposed on any Quaker 'for truth's sake'. Friends did their utmost to help by bringing her food, books and especially paper and ink, as from her cell she blithely carried on her staggering correspondence. One of the recipients of her pleas for religious freedom was King Charles II, whom she addressed consistently as 'Dear Heart'.

Imprisonment was not the only punishment for being a Child of the Light. In the sixties many Friends were sentenced to exile in Massachusetts as 'indentured servants'. The New England Puritans had started a persecution of the Quakers which surpassed that of the motherland in savagery. All Quakers were arrested on arrival in Boston; the captains of the vessels that carried them were fined for putting them ashore; four were hanged on Boston Common, one of them a woman; many languished and died in prison, others were sent on to the penal colony of 'Rhoad Island'.

After Margaret Fell's release from prison, she and George Fox were married. It was, in the eyes of the world at least, a marriage

of convenience; they were now joint leaders of the burgeoning Quaker movement. After her years in the dungeons Margaret was a white-haired, gaunt woman; George a benign, saintly man described by William Penn as 'a bulky person'. Margaret's courage never flagged. During a brief lull in the persecution of the Quakers she organised a women's brigade to help the prisoners in Brixton prison in London, at that time the worst of all. She dressed them in red and green, so they might stand out in the perpetual dusk and thereby escape assault.

In 1681 a hundred Quakers, headed by William Penn, set sail for America on the ship Welcome. *Their plan was to start an ideal community in the wilderness, governed according to the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. They lived for over a year in caves and huts on the banks of the river while building their first settlement, which they christened Philadelphia, City of Brotherly Love. Owing to their fairness in business, their paying the Indians promptly for each piece of land they bought and their silent meetings for worship, in which the Indians frequently participated, 'the Holy Experiment' was successful. The colony prospered; before the turn of the century Philadelphia had grown to be the largest port in North America.*

In 1691 George Fox died in London, aged sixty-seven; Margaret Fell eleven years later, at the age of eighty-eight. One of the last things she did was to oversee the publication of George's journal, a book that was to become a major influence in Quakerism. But as published, it did not contain all he had written; the manuscript had been heavily edited and in some instances changed by a committee of London Friends; there can be no doubt, however, that the final responsibility was his widow's. All miracles and supernatural occurrences were deleted, all references to 'The Book of Rewards'; the hangmen in Derby Jail no longer obeyed George's passionate cry, but some vague impulse within themselves that was not explained. From its pages emerged not the man George Fox had been, but the one Margaret Fell decided he should have been. During his lifetime she and he had battled for supremacy in the Society of Friends, each trying to impose a different concept of love on the movement as its guiding star. Only after his death did sly old Maggie, mischievous saint, finally have her way; henceforth the accent in the spiritual life of Quakers would be on service rather than salvation, tenderness rather than righteousness, and on infinite patience with the foibles of others as well as one's own.

It was a concept that would lead to great things: the first prison reform, the first humane treatment of the insane, the first school among the Indians, the first abolition of slavery, but —

But this is where the second part of the saga begins.

JAN DE HARTOG

JAN DE HARTOG was born in Haarlem, Holland, in 1914, the son of a Calvinist father and a Quaker mother. He ran off to sea at an early age. In 1940, just after the Germans occupied Holland, his novel *Holland's Glory* was published, a story of the Dutch ocean-going tugboats on which he had served. Although it mentioned neither the war nor the Germans, it became a symbol of Dutch defiance and was banned by the Nazis, but not until 300,000 copies had been sold. In 1943 the author escaped to England.

Since then Mr. de Hartog has written a number of books: *The Lost Sea, The Distant Shore, A Sailor's Life* (these three are now collected in the volume entitled *The Call of the Sea*), *The Little Ark, The Spiral Road, The Inspector, Waters of the New World, The Artist, The Hospital, The Captain* and *The Children.*

Mr. de Hartog's name has gained added familiarity through the popularity of his plays *Skipper Next to God* and *The Fourposter* (both of which became films, and *The Fourposter* was adapted for the musical stage as *I Do! I Do!*). Four of his novels have also been made into films: *The Distant Shore* as *The Key, The Inspector* as *Lisa, The Spiral Road* and *The Little Ark.*

Both Mr. de Hartog and his wife, Marjorie, are active in the Religious Society of Friends.

The Peaceable Kingdom

Jan de Hartog

The Holy Experiment **1754–1755

The Holy Experiment is the second part of Jan de Hartog's engrossing bestseller about the growth and life of the Quaker movement, The Peaceable Kingdom

The Children of the Light had been born; now came the Holy Experiment.

In 1681 a group of Quakers, led by William Penn, had sailed to America. There it was that they eventually founded their first settlement in what is now the city of Philadelphia. The community grew and prospered; some made vast fortunes and raised large families; they lived in considerable comfort and employed slaves. They made pacts with the Indians. They subdued the wilderness and turned it to their own uses.

But with wealth had come difficulties. Success bred complacency and the aims of the founders came to be eroded and ignored. And it was only through pain that many discovered that the quality of living can so often be more important than the standard of life.

'A huge novel which may very well take its place in scale and scope beside *Gone with the Wind* as a landmark in American fiction'— *Literary Guild Magazine*

'Brimful of magnificent, vigorous characters, struggling and loving and plotting and all but rising off the page to move the reader' — *Book-of-the-Month Club News*

Her brilliant new bestseller of a young girl's struggle against Victorian hypocrisy

Lovers All Untrue

Norah Lofts

Marion Draper was a rebel with just cause against the stifling conventions of her time

In the oppressive world of the Victorian middle class, wives and daughters were expected to live as respectful cabbages and always to obey papa's dictates. The Draper family—father, mother and their two daughters—were no exception. Given virtually no education, discouraged from independent striving and rigidly separated from 'undesirable' social contacts, Marion Draper had much to rebel against.

High-spirited and intelligent, the squashing of her natural personality led to inevitable consequences—an illicit friendship with a young man which quickly developed into a passionate love affair.

After a traumatic series of events, her lover is revealed in his true worthless light. Breaking free of him, she has a glimpse of real freedom and emancipation; but the sight is illusory and she struggles, like a pinned butterfly, against destiny's grip.

'Norah Lofts never puts a word wrong: the period setting is beautifully depicted and her characters have a splendid vitality'—*Woman's Journal*

The Antagonists

Ernest K. Gann

'A book so finely wrought and deeply felt that it will be an enriching experience for every reader.' Irving Stone — author of 'The Passions of the Mind'

This is the story of one of the most thrilling and most tragic of all historical events, the Roman siege of the Jews at Masada in A.D. 73. Two great antagonists face each other: the Roman General Flavius Silva, Commander of the Xth Legion; and Eleazar ben Yair, leader of the 900 Jews still resisting the power of Imperial Rome and clinging to freedom on the heights of Masada.

In his breathtaking account of their struggle Ernest K. Gann reveals his enormous talent for re-creating history. Moment by moment the reader is swept along in the frantic tide of military preparation, militant ideology and turbulent personal emotion that swirls around the antagonists as the novel surges towards an awesome climax.

'Big, booming, bloody' — *Sunday Times*

'A gripping account of one of the great epic stories' — *Jewish Chronicle*

Soon to be a major Universal Pictures production.

The Moon Into Blood

Catherine Gavin

For centuries the kingdoms and states of Italy had suffered invasion and occupation by alien powers. In 1858 an Italian patriot, Felice Orsini, hoped to strike a blow for independence by killing the French Emperor, Napoleon III.

Among those who suffered on the night of the attempted assassination was Jenny Cameron, a young American girl travelling in Europe for the first time with the sophisticated but corrupt woman who was her mother. Jenny's reunion with an old friend, Steven Blake, employed as an engineer of the new Mont Cenis tunnel, threw them both into the hands of Cavour and Garibaldi, commanders of the storm in which a united Italy was brought to birth.

Catherine Gavin has won international acclaim for her historical novels, and the following quote from the *Los Angeles Mirror-News* is representative of the praise that has been heaped upon her:

'Her writing cuts across life and death, love and war, debauchery and devotion, with the boldness and not a little of the grasp of a Tolstoy.'

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THE CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT is the first part of Jan de Hartog's engrossing bestseller about the growth and life of the Quaker movement, THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

It began in Lancashire one summer afternoon in 1652 when two horsemen blundered into the quicksands of Morecombe Bay. One of the horsemen was George Fox, and one of those close to him at that time was Margaret Fell. From the passionate meeting of these two grew the Religious Society of Friends and the seeds of Quaker history were sown.

Fox lived and preached the Word in a violent, turbulent society. Cromwell never cared overmuch for non-Conformists; and in their turn Royalists and republicans alike went to great lengths in their efforts to degrade and humiliate the new breed of believers. But the courage, the strength in the face of fantastic persecution, the love and respect these people felt for each other – they were already brightly present, laying the foundations for further glory and further involvement in the years ahead.

'A huge novel which may very well take its place in scale and scope beside *Gone with the Wind* as a landmark in American fiction' *Literary Guild Magazine*

'Brimful of magnificent, vigorous characters, struggling and loving and plotting and all but rising off the page to move the reader' *Book-of-the-Month Club News*

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